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# 1. Wherever You Go, There You Are

## SENECA, LETTER 28

*Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) was a Stoic philosopher, statesman, and advisor at court to the emperor Nero. His collection of letters to a younger friend named Lucilius, the Moral Epistles, are really essays meant for a wider readership. In this letter Seneca offers his protégé a meditation on being a “global citizen” (cosmopolitēs in Greek, a word coined by the Cynics, but also a Stoic ideal). We should not be provincial in our mindsets or hidebound by time or place. And yet, Seneca argues, traveling to experience the big world out there, as those who can are wont to do, will, in and of itself, bring no peace of mind to a sick or anxious soul. Whether we travel out of boredom or the perceived need for recreation, we travel with the Self and its baggage in tow.*

SENECA

SENECA LUCILIO SUO SALUTEM

1. Hoc tibi soli putas accidisse et admiraris quasi rem novam, quod peregrinatione tam longa et tot locorum varietatibus non discussisti tristitiam gravitatemque mentis? Animum debes mutare, non caelum. Licet vastum traieceris mare, licet, ut ait Vergilius noster,

Terraeque urbesque recedant,

2. sequentur te, quocumque perveneris, vitia. Hoc idem querenti cuidam Socrates ait: “Quid miraris nihil tibi peregrinationes prodesse, cum te circumferas? Premit te eadem causa, quae expulit.” Quid terrarum iuvare novitas potest? Quid cognitio urbium aut locorum? In inritum cedit ista iactatio. Quaeris quare te fuga ista non adiuvet? Tecum fugis. Onus animi deponendum est; non ante tibi ullus placebit locus.

WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOU ARE

My dear Lucilius,

Do you think you're the only one to have had this happen to you? Are you surprised, as if it were a strange occurrence, that after such a long stint of travel to so many different places you still haven't shaken off your heavy heart and depression? You need to change your mind, not your climes. Although you cross vast seas and watch, in the words of Vergil, as "the shore and its cities recede in the distance,"<sup>1</sup> your faults will still follow you, whatever your destination. Socrates said as much to someone who was complaining about this same thing: "Why are you surprised that traveling does you no good, when you carry yourself in tow? The cause that impelled you on your journey and oppresses you now is one and the same." What use are experiences of foreign lands? What good is cognizance of their sites and cities?<sup>2</sup> All your restlessness produces no results. You ask why that sort of escape is of no use? Your companion in flight is your Self. You must lay down the mind's burden. Until you do, nowhere will satisfy you.

SENECA

3. Talem nunc esse habitum tuum cogita, qualem Vergilius noster vatis inducit iam concitatae et instigatae multumque habentis in se spiritus non sui:

Bacchatur vates, magnum si pectore possit  
Excussisse deum.

Vadis huc illuc, ut excutias insidens pondus, quod ipsa iactatione incommodius fit, sicut in navi onera inmota minus urgent, inaequaliter convoluta citius eam partem, in quam incubuere, demergunt. Quicquid facis, contra te facis et motu ipso noces tibi; aegrum enim concutis.

4. At cum istud exemeris malum, omnis mutatio loci iucunda fiet; in ultimas expellaris terras licebit, in quolibet barbariae angulo conloceris, hospitalis tibi illa qualiscumque sedes erit. Magis quis veneris quam quo, interest, et ideo nulli loco addicere debemus animum. Cum hac persuasione vivendum est: “Non sum uni angulo natus, patria mea totus hic mundus est.” 5. Quod si liqueret tibi, non admirareris nil adiuvari te regionum varietatibus, in quas subinde priorum taedio migras. Prima enim quaeque placuisset, si omnem tuam crederes.

WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOU ARE

Consider your predicament like that of the prophetess, the Sibyl, whom Vergil portrays as prodded and goaded to madness, having a spirit in her that is not her own, “raving like a devotee of Bacchus, if only to shake the great god from her breast.”<sup>3</sup> You, too, wander about to shake off the burden lodged in you, which all that jostling just makes more uncomfortable. It’s the same on a ship, where the cargo causes less bother when it’s stationary; but when it shifts, it quickly unbalances things and the ship lists in the direction where the cargo’s settled. Similarly, whatever you do ends up working against you and you end up doing yourself harm by the very act of moving about. Why? Because you’re shaking up someone who’s already sick.

However, once you have removed that malady, every change of scene will become pleasant. Although you be driven in future to far-flung lands, in whatever corner of a foreign country you might settle, wherever it is, it will be a hospitable home to you. It is more a question of who you are than where you’re headed. We should not, therefore, attach our minds to any one place. We should live by this conviction: “I was not born to live in one corner of the world; this whole universe is my homeland.” If this were clear to you, you would

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SENECA

Nunc non peregrinaris, sed erras et ageris ac locum  
ex loco mutas, cum illud, quod quaeris, bene vivere,  
omni loco positum sit. . . .

VALE.

WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOU ARE

not be surprised when various changes of place do you no good since you're wending your way out of boredom with your previous settings. Your first destination, wherever it might be, would have suited you if you were convinced it was wholly yours. As things stand, you're not traveling, but wandering—indeed *are being driven*—and merely swap one place for another when what you're really seeking—the good life—is to be found everywhere....

Be well,  
Seneca

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