

Plutarch

Consolatory Letter to His Wife

Taken from *Plutarch's Morals*. Translated from the Greek by Several Hands. Corrected and Revised by William W. Goodwin, with an Introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1878). Some modifications have been made to the text. This document is in the public domain.

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Plutarch to his wife: All health.

1. As for the messenger you despatched to tell me of the death of my little daughter, it seems he missed his way as he was going to Athens. But when I came to Tanagra, I heard of it by my niece. I suppose by this time the funeral is over. I wish that whatever has been done may create you no dissatisfaction, as well now as hereafter. But if you have designedly let any thing alone, depending upon my judgment, thinking better to determine the point if I were with you, I pray let it be without ceremony and timorous superstition, which I know are far from you.

2. Only, dear wife, let you and me bear our affliction with patience. I know very well and do comprehend what loss we have had; but if I should find you grieve beyond measure, this would trouble me more than the thing itself. For I had my birth neither from a stock nor a stone;* and you know it full well, I having been assistant to you in the education of so many children, which we brought up at home under our own care. This daughter was born after four sons, when you were longing to bear a daughter; which made me call her by your own name. Therefore I know she was particularly dear to you. And grief must have a peculiar pungency in a mind tenderly affectionate to children, when you call to mind how naturally witty and innocent she was, void of anger, and not querulous. She was naturally mild, and compassionate to a miracle. And her gratitude and kindness not only gave us delight, but also manifested her generous nature; for she would pray her nurse to give suck, not only to other children, but to her very playthings, as it were courteously inviting them to her table, and making the best cheer for them she could.

3. Now, my dear wife, I see no reason why these and the like things, which delighted us so much when she was alive, should upon remembrance of them afflict us when she is dead. But I also fear lest, while we cease from sorrowing, we should forget her; as Clymene said,

I hate the handy horned bow,
And banish youthful pastimes now;

because she would not be put in mind of her son by the exercises he had been used to. For Nature always shuns such things as are troublesome. But since our little daughter afforded all our senses the sweetest and most charming pleasure; so ought we to cherish her memory, which will conduce many ways — or rather many fold — more to our joy than our grief. And it is but just, that the same arguments which we have oft-times used to others should prevail upon ourselves at this so seasonable a time, and that we should not supinely sit down and overwhelm the joys which we have tasted with a multiplicity of new griefs.

4. Moreover, they who were present at the funeral report this with admiration, that you neither put on mourning, nor disfigured yourself or any of your maids; neither were there any costly preparations nor magnificent pomp; but all things were managed with silence and moderation in the presence of our relatives alone. And it seemed not strange to me that you, who never used richly to dress yourself for the theatre or other public solemnities, esteeming such magnificence vain and useless even in matters of delight, have now practised frugality on this sad occasion. For a virtuous woman ought not only to preserve her purity in riotous feasts, but also to think thus with herself, that the tempest of the mind in violent grief must be calmed by patience, which does not intrench on the natural love of parents towards their children, as many think, but only struggles against the disorderly and irregular passions of the mind. For we allow this love of children to discover itself in lamenting, wishing for, and longing after them when they are dead. But the excessive inclination to grief, which carries people on to unseemly exclamations and furious behavior, is no less culpable than luxurious intemperance. Yet reason seems to plead in its excuse; because, instead of pleasure, grief and sorrow are ingredients of the crime. What can be more irrational, I pray, than to check excessive laughter and joy, and yet to give a free course to rivers of tears and sighs, which flow from the same fountain? Or, as some do, quarrel with their wives for using artificial helps to beauty, and in the mean time suffer them to shave their heads, wear the mournful black, sit disconsolate, and lie in pain? And, which is worst of all, if their wives at any time chastise their servants or maids immoderately, they will interpose and hinder them, but at the same time suffering them to torment and punish themselves most cruelly, in a case which peculiarly requires their greatest tenderness and humanity?

5. But between us, dear wife, there never was any occasion for such contests, nor, I think, will there ever be. For there is no philosopher of our acquaintance who is not in love with your frugality, both in apparel and diet; nor a citizen, to whom the simplicity and plainness of your dress is not conspicuous, both at religious sacrifices and public shows in the theatre. Formerly also you discovered on the like occasion a great constancy of mind, when you lost your eldest son; and again, when the lovely Chaeron left us. For I remember, when the news was brought me of my son's death, as I was returning home with some friends and guests who accompanied me to my house, when they beheld all things in order, and observed a profound silence everywhere, — as they afterwards declared to others, — they thought no such calamity had happened, but that the report was false. So discreetly had you settled the affairs of the house at that time, when no small confusion and disorder might have been expected. And yet you gave this son suck yourself, and endured the lancing of your breast, to prevent the ill effects of a contusion. These are things worthy of a generous woman, and one that loves her children.

6. Whereas, we see most other women receive their children in their hands as playthings with a feminine mirth and jollity; and afterwards, if they chance to die, they will drench themselves in the most vain and excessive sorrow. Not that this is any effect of their love, for that gentle passion acts regularly and discreetly; but it rather proceeds from a desire of vain-glory, mixed with a little natural affection, which renders their mourning barbarous, brutish, and extravagant. Which thing Aesop knew very well, when he told the story of Jupiter's giving honors to the Gods; for, it seems, Grief also made her demands, and it was granted that she should be honored, but only by those who were willing of their own accord to do it. And indeed, this is the beginning of sorrow. Everybody first gives her free access; and after she is once rooted and settled and become familiar, she will not be forced thence with their best endeavors. Therefore she must be resisted at her first approach; nor must we surrender the fort to her by any exterior signs, whether of apparel, or shaving the hair, or any other such like symptoms of mournful weakness; which happening daily, and wounding us by degrees with a kind of foolish bashfulness, at length do so enervate the mind, and reduce her to such straits, that quite dejected and besieged with grief, the poor timorous wretch dare not be merry, or see the light, or eat and drink in company. This inconvenience is accompanied by a neglect of the body, carelessness of anointing and bathing, with whatsoever else relates to the elegance of human life. Whereas, on the contrary, the soul, when it is disordered, ought to receive aid from the vigor of a

healthful body. For the sharpest edge of the soul's grief is rebated and slacked, when the body is in tranquillity and ease, like the sea in a calm. But where, from an ill course of diet, the body becomes dry and hot, so that it cannot supply the soul with commodious and serene spirits, but only breathes forth melancholy vapors and exhalations, which perpetually annoy her with grief and sadness; there it is difficult for a man (though never so willing and desirous) to recover the tranquillity of his mind, after it has been disturbed with so many evil affections.

7. But that which is most to be dreaded in this case does not at all affrighten me, to wit, the visits of foolish women, and their accompanying you in your tears and lamentations; by which they sharpen your grief, not suffering it either of itself or by the help of others to fade and vanish away. For I am not ignorant how great a combat you lately entered, when you assisted the sister of Theon, and opposed the women who came running in with horrid cries and lamentations, bringing fuel as it were to her passion. Assuredly, when men see their neighbor's house on fire, every one contributes his utmost to quench it; but when they see the mind inflamed with furious passion, they bring fuel to nourish and increase the flame. When a man's eye is in pain, he is not suffered to touch it, though the inflammation provoke him to it, nor will they that are near him meddle with it. But he who is galled with grief sits and exposes his distemper to every one, like waters that all may poach in; and so that which at first seemed a light itching or trivial smart, by much fretting and provoking, becomes a great and almost incurable disease. But I know very well that you will arm yourself against these inconveniences.

8. Moreover, I would have you endeavor to call often to mind that time when our daughter was not as yet born to us, and when we had no cause to complain of Fortune. Then, joining that time with this, argue thus with yourself, that we are now in the same condition as then. Otherwise, dear wife, we shall seem discontented at the birth of our little daughter, if we own that our circumstances were better before her birth. But the two years of her life are by no means to be forgotten by us, but to be numbered amongst our blessings, in that they afforded us an agreeable pleasure. Nor must we esteem a small good for a great evil; nor ungratefully complain against Fortune for what she has actually given us, because she has not added what we wished for. Certainly, to speak reverently of the Gods, and to bear our lot with an even mind without accusing Fortune, always brings with it a fair reward. But he who in such a case calls prosperous things to mind, and turning his thoughts from dark and melancholy objects, fixes them on bright and cheerful ones, will either quite extinguish his grief, or by allaying it with contrary sentiments, will render it weak and feeble. For, as perfumes bring delight to the nose, and arm it against ill scents, so the remembrance of happiness gives necessary assistance in adversity to those who avoid not the recollection of their past prosperity nor complain at all against Fortune. For certainly it would little become us to accuse our life, if like a book it hath but one little blot in it, though all the rest be fair and clean.

9. For you have oftentimes heard, that true happiness consists in the right discourses and counsels of the mind, tending to its own constant establishment, and that the changes of Fortune are of no great importance to the felicity of our life. But even if we must also be governed by exterior things, and with the common sort of people have a regard to casualties, and suffer any kind of men to be judges of our happiness, however, do not you take notice of the tears and moans of such as visit you at present, condoling your misfortunes; for their tears and sighs are but of course. But rather, do you consider how happy every one of them esteems you for the children you have, the house you keep, and the life you lead. For it would be an ill thing, while others covet your fortune, though sullied with this affliction, that you should exclaim against what you enjoy, and not be sensible, from the taste of affliction, how grateful you ought to be for the happiness which remains untouched. Or, like some who, collecting all the defective verses of Homer, pass over at the same time so many excellent parts of his poems, so shall we peevishly complain of and reckon up the inconveniences of our life, neglecting at the same time promiscuously the benefits thereof? Or, shall we imitate covetous and sordid misers, who, having heaped together much riches, never enjoy what they have in possession, but bewail it if it chance to be lost?

But if you lament the poor girl because she died unmarried and without offspring, you have wherewithal to comfort yourself, in that you are defective in none of these things, having had your share. And these are not to be esteemed at once great evils where they are wanted, and small benefits where they are enjoyed. But so long as she is gone to a place where she feels no pain, what need is there of our grief? For what harm can befall us from her, when she is free from all hurt? And surely the loss of even great things abates the grief, when it is come to this, that we have no need or use of them. But thy Timoxena was deprived but of small matter; for she had no knowledge but of such, neither took she delight but in such small things. But for that which she never was sensible of, and which did not so much as once enter into her thoughts, how can you say it is taken from her?

10. As for what you hear others say, who persuade the vulgar that the soul, when once freed from the body, suffers no inconvenience or evil nor is sensible at all, I know that you are better grounded in the doctrines delivered down to us from our ancestors, as also in the sacred mysteries of Bacchus, than to believe such stories; for the religious symbols are well known to us who are of the fraternity. Therefore be assured, that the soul, being incapable of death, is affected in the same manner as birds that are kept in a cage. For if she has been a long time educated and cherished in the body, and by long custom has been made familiar with most things of this life, she will (though separable) return again, and at length enter the body; nor ceaseth it by new births now and then to be entangled in the chances and events of this life. For do not think that old age is therefore evil spoken of and blamed, because it is accompanied with wrinkles, gray hairs, and weakness of body. But this is the most troublesome thing in old age, that it maketh the soul weak in its remembrance of divine things, and too earnest for things relating to the body; thus it bendeth and boweth, retaining that form which it took of the body. But that which is taken away in youth, being more soft and tractable, soon returns to its native vigor and beauty. Just as fire that is quenched, if it be forthwith kindled again, sparkles and burns out immediately. . . . So most speedily

'Twere good to pass the gates of death, [*cf. Iliad* V. 646; XXIII. 71.]

before too great a love of bodily and earthly things be engendered in the soul, and it become soft and tender by being used to the body, and (as it were) by charms and potions incorporated with it.

11. But the truth of this will appear in the laws and traditions received from our ancestors. For when children die, no libations nor sacrifices are made for them, nor any other of those ceremonies which are wont to be performed for the dead. For infants have no part of earth or earthly affections. Nor do we hover or tarry about their sepulchres or monuments, or sit by when their dead bodies are exposed. The laws of our country forbid this, and teach us that it is an impious thing to lament for those whose souls pass immediately into a better and more divine state. Wherefore, since it is safer to give credit to our traditions than to call them in question, let us comply with the custom in outward and public behavior, and let our interior be more unpolluted, pure, and holy....