

Discourses on the Sober Life - How to Live 100 Years

by Luigi Cornaro

The First Discourse: On a Temperate and Healthful Life

It is universally agreed, that custom, in time, becomes a second nature, forcing men to use that, whether good or bad, to which they have been habituated; in fact, we see habit, in many instances, gain the ascendancy over reason. This is so undeniably true, that virtuous men, by keeping company with wicked, often fall into the same vicious course of life. Seeing and considering all this, I have decided to write on the vice of intemperance in eating and drinking.

Now, though all are agreed that intemperance is the parent of gluttony, and sober living the offspring of abstemiousness; yet, owing to the power of custom, the former is considered a virtue, and the latter as mean and avaricious; and so many men are blinded and besotted to such a degree, that they come to the age of forty or fifty, burdened with strange and painful infirmities, which render them decrepit and useless; whereas, had they lived temperately and soberly, they would in all probability have been sound and hearty, to the age of eighty and upward.

Strive for simplicity

To remedy this state of things, it is requisite that men should live up to the simplicity dictated by nature, which teaches us to be content with little, and accustom ourselves to eat no more than is absolutely necessary to support life, remembering that all excess causes disease and leads to death. How many friends of mine, men of the finest understanding and most amiable disposition, have I seen carried off in the flower of their manhood by reason of excess and overfeeding, who, had they been temperate, would now be living, and ornaments to society, and whose company I should enjoy with as much pleasure as I am now deprived of it with concern.

In order, therefore, to put a stop to so great an evil, I have resolved, in this short discourse, to demonstrate that intemperance is an abuse which may be removed, and that the good old sober living may be substituted in its stead; and this I undertake the more readily, as many young men of the best understanding have urged upon me its necessity because of many of their parents having died in middle life, while I remain so sound and hearty at the age of eighty-one.

These young men express a desire to reach the same term, nature not forbidding us to wish for longevity; and old age, being, in fact, that time of life in which prudence can be best exercised, and the fruits of all the other virtues enjoyed with the least opposition, the senses then being so subdued, that man gives himself up entirely to reason. They besought me to let them know the method pursued by me to attain it; and then finding them intent on so laudable a pursuit, I resolved to treat of that method, in order to be of service, not only to them, but to all those who may be willing to peruse this discourse.

Reasons to renounce intemperance

I shall therefore give my reasons for renouncing intemperance and betaking myself to a sober course of life, and declare freely the method pursued by me for that purpose, and then show the good effect upon me; from whence it will be seen how easy it is to remove the abuse of free living. I shall conclude, by showing the many conveniences and blessings of temperate life.

I say, then, that the heavy train of infirmities which had made great inroads on my constitution were my motives for renouncing intemperance, in the matter of too freely eating and drinking, to which I had been addicted, so that, in consequence of it, my stomach became disordered, and I suffered much pain from colic and gout, attended by that which was still worse, an almost continual slow fever, a stomach generally out of order, and a perpetual thirst. From these disorders, the best delivery I had to hope was death.

Finding myself, therefore, between my thirty-fifth and fortieth year in such unhappy circumstances, and having tried everything that could be thought of to relieve me, but to no purpose, the physicians gave me to understand that there was one method left to get the better of my complaints, provided I would resolve to use it, and patiently persevere. This was to live a strictly sober and regular life, which would be of the greatest efficacy; and that of this I might convince myself, since, by my disorders I was become infirm, though not reduced so low but that a regular life might still recover me.

They further added, that, if I did not at once adopt this method of strict living, I should in a few months receive no benefit from it, and that in a few more I must resign myself to death.

Luigi decides to change his life

These arguments made such an impression on me, that, mortified as I was, besides, by the thought of dying in the prime of life, though at the same time perpetually tormented by various diseases, I immediately resolved, in order to avoid at once both disease and death, to betake myself to a regular course of life. Having upon this inquired of them what rules I should follow, they told me that I must only use food, solid or liquid, such as is generally prescribed to sick persons; and both sparingly.

These directions, to say the truth, they had before given me, but I had been impatient of such restraint, and had eaten and drank freely of those things I had desired. But, when I had once resolved to live soberly, and according to the dictates of reason, feeling it was my duty as a man so to do, I entered with so much resolution upon this new course of life, that nothing since has been able to divert me from it. The consequence was, that in a few days I began to perceive that such a course agreed well with me; and, by pursuing it, I found myself in less than a year (some people, perhaps, will not believe it) entirely freed from all my complaints.

Having thus recovered my health, I began seriously to consider the power of temperance: if it had efficacy enough to subdue such grievous disorders as mine it must also have power to preserve me in health and strengthen my bad constitution. I therefore applied myself diligently to discover what kinds of food suited me best.

Please the stomach and not the palate!

But, first, I resolved to try whether those which pleased my palate were agreeable to my stomach, so that I might judge of the truth of the proverb, which is so universally held, namely: That, whatever pleases the palate, must agree with the stomach, or, that whatever is palatable must be wholesome and nourishing.

The issue was, that I found it to be false, for I soon found that many things which pleased my palate, disagreed with my stomach.

Having thus convinced myself that the proverb in question was false, I gave over the use of such meats and wines as did not suit me, and chose those which by experience I found agreed well with me, taking only as much as I could easily digest, having strict regard to quantity as well as quality; and contrived matters so as never to cloy my stomach with eating or drinking, and always rose from the table with a disposition to eat and drink more. In this I conformed to the proverb, which says, that a man to consult his health must check his appetite.

Having in this manner conquered intemperance I betook myself entirely to a temperate and regular life, and this it was which effected me that alteration already mentioned, that is, in less than a year, it rid me of all those disorders which had taken such hold on me, and which appeared at the time incurable.

It had likewise this other good effect, that I no longer experienced those annual fits of sickness, with which I used to be afflicted while I followed my ordinary free manner of eating and drinking. I also became exceedingly healthy, as I have continued from that time to this day; and for no other reason than that I never transgressed against regularity and strict moderation.

In consequence, therefore, of my taking such methods, I have always enjoyed, and, God be praised, still enjoy, the best of health. It is true, that, besides the two most important rules relative to eating and drinking, which I have ever been very scrupulous to observe (that is, not to take of either, more than my stomach could easily digest, and to use only those things which agree with me), I have carefully avoided, as far as possible, all extreme heat, cold, extraordinary fatigue, interruption of my usual hours of rest, and staying long in bad air.

I likewise did all that lay in my power, to avoid those evils, which we do not find it so easy to remove: melancholy, hatred, and other violent passions, which appear to have the greatest influence on our bodies. I have not, however, been able to guard so well against these disorders, as not to suffer myself now and then to be hurried away by them. But I have discovered this fact, that these passions, have, in the main, no great influence over bodies governed by the two foregoing rules of eating and drinking.

Not more illness, ever

Galen, who was an eminent physician, has said, that, so long as he followed these two rules, he suffered but little from such disorders, so little, that they never gave him above a day's uneasiness. That what he says is true, I am a living witness, and so are many others who know me, and have seen me, how often I have been exposed to heats and colds, and disagreeable changes of weather, without taking harm, and have likewise seen me (owing to various misfortunes which have more than once befallen me) greatly disturbed in mind; these things, however, did me but little harm, whereas, other members of my family, who followed not my way of living, were greatly disturbed; such in a word, was their grief and dejection at seeing me involved in expensive law suits, commenced against me by great and powerful men, that, fearing I should be ruined, they were seized with great melancholy humor, with which intemperate bodies always abound, and such influence had it over their bodies, that they were carried off before their time; whereas, I suffered nothing on the occasion, as I had in me no superfluous humors of that kind; nay, in order to keep up my spirits, I brought myself to think that God had permitted these suits against me, in order to make me more sensible of my strength of body and mind; and that I should get the better of them with honor and advantage, as it, in fact, came to pass; for, at last, I obtained a decree exceedingly favorable to my fortune and character.

Luigi describes his accident

But I may go a step farther, and show how favorable to recovery is a temperate life, in case of accident. At the age of seventy years, I happened, as is often the case, to be in a coach, which, going at a smart rate, was upset, and in that condition drawn a considerable way before the horses could be stopped. I received so many shocks and bruises, that I was taken out with my head and body terribly battered, and a dislocated leg and arm. When the physicians saw me in so bad a plight, they concluded that in three days I should die, but thought they would try what bleeding and purging would do, in order to prevent inflammation and fever.

And refuses help from the "doctors

But I, on the contrary, knowing that, by reason of the sober life I had lived for so many years, my blood was in good and pure condition, refused to be either purged or bled. I just caused my arm and leg to be set, and suffered myself to be rubbed with some oils, which they said were proper on the occasion. Thus, without using any other kind of remedy, I recovered, as I thought I should, without feeling the least alteration in myself, or any bad effects from the accident; a thing which appeared no less than miraculous in the eyes of the physicians.

Hence, we may infer, that he who leads a sober and regular life, and commits no excess in his diet, can suffer but little from mental disorders or external accidents. On the contrary, I conclude, especially from the late trial I have had, that excesses in eating and drinking are often fatal. Four years ago, I consented to increase the quantity of my food by two ounces, my friends and relations having, for some time past, urged upon me the necessity of such increase, that the quantity I took was too little for one so advanced in years; against this, I urged that nature was content with little, and that with this small quantity I had preserved myself for many years in health and activity, that I believed as a man advanced in years, his stomach grew weaker, and therefore the tendency should be to lessen the amount of food rather than to increase.

I further reminded them of the two proverbs, which say: he who has a mind to eat a great deal, must eat but little; eating little makes life long, and, living long, he must eat much; and the other proverb was: that, what we leave after making a hearty meal, does us more good than what we have eaten. But my arguments and proverbs were not able to prevent them teasing me upon the subject; therefore, not to appear obstinate, or affecting to know more than the physicians themselves, but above all, to please my family, I consented to the increase before mentioned; so that, whereas previous, what with bread, meat, the yolk of an egg, and soup, I ate as much as twelve ounces, neither more nor less, I now increased it to fourteen; and whereas before I drank but fourteen ounces of wine, I now increased it to sixteen.

This increase, had, in eight days' time, such an effect upon me, that, from being cheerful and brisk, I began to be peevish and melancholy, so that nothing could please me. On the twelfth day, I was attacked with a violent pain in my side, which lasted twenty-two hours and was followed by a fever, which continued thirty-five days without any respite, insomuch that all looked upon me as a dead man; but, God be praised, I recovered, and I am positive that it was the great regularity I had observed for so many years, and that only, which rescued me from the jaws of death.

Orderly living is, doubtless, a most certain cause and foundation of health and long life; nay, I say it is the only true medicine, and whoever weighs the matter well, will come to this conclusion. Hence it is, that when the physician comes to visit a patient, the first thing he prescribes is regular living, and certainly to avoid excess. Now, if the patient after recovery should continue so to live, he could not be sick again, and if a very small quantity of food is sufficient to restore his health, then but a slight addition is necessary for the continuance of the same; and so, for the future, he would want neither physician nor physic.

Become your own physician

Nay, by attending to what I have said, he would become his own physician, and indeed, the best he could have, since, in fact, no man should be a perfect physician to any but himself. The reason is, that any man, by repeated trials, may acquire a perfect knowledge of his own constitution, the kinds of food and drink which agree with him best. These repeated trials are necessary, as there is a great variety in the nature and stomachs of persons. I found that old wine did not suit me, but that the new wines did; and, after long practice, I discovered that many things, which might not be injurious to others, were not good for me. Now, where is the physician who could have informed me which to take, and which to avoid, since I by long observation, could scarce discover these things.

It follows, therefore, that it is impossible to be a perfect physician to another. A man cannot have a better guide than himself, nor any physic better than a regular life. I do not, however, mean that for the knowledge and cure of such disorders as befall those who live an irregular life there is no occasion for a physician and that his assistance ought to be slighted; such persons should at once call in medical aid, in case of sickness. But, for the bare purpose of keeping ourselves in good health, I am of opinion, that we should consider this regular life as our physician, since it preserves men, even those of a weak constitution, in health; makes them live sound and hearty, to the age of one hundred and upward, and prevents their dying of sickness, or through the corruption of their humors, but merely by the natural decay, which at the last must come to all.

Alas, few discover these truths

These things, however, are discovered but by few, for men, for the most part, are sensual and intemperate, and love to satisfy their appetites, and to commit every excess; and, by way of apology, say that they prefer a short and self-indulgent life, to a long and self-denying one, not knowing that those men are most truly happy who keep their appetites in subjection. Thus have I found it, and I prefer to live temperately, so that I may live long and be useful. Had I not been temperate, I should never have written these tracts, which I have the pleasure of thinking will be serviceable to others. Sensual men affirm that no man can live a regular life.

To this I answer, that Galen, who was a great physician, led such a life, and chose it as the best physic. The same did Plato, Cicero, Isocrates, and many other great men of former times, whom not to tire the reader I forbear naming; and, in our days, Pope Paul Farnese and Cardinal Bembo; and it was for that reason they lived so long.

Therefore, since many have led this life, and many are actually leading it, surely all might conform to it, and the more so, as no great difficulty attends it. Cicero affirms that nothing is needed, but to be in good earnest. Plato, you say, though he himself lived thus regularly, affirms that, in republics, men often cannot do so, being obliged to expose themselves to various hardships and changes, which are incompatible with a regular life. I answer, that men who have to undergo these things, would be the better able to bear such hardships by being strictly temperate in matters of eating and drinking.

Here it may be objected, that he who leads this strict and regular life, having constantly when well made use only of simple food fit for the sick, and in small quantities, has when himself in sickness, no recourse left in matters of diet. To which I reply, that, whoever leads a regular life, cannot be sick or at least but seldom. By a regular life I mean, that a man shall ascertain for himself, how small a quantity of food and drink is sufficient to supply the daily wants of his nature and then having done this, and found out the kinds of food and drink best suited for his constitution, he shall, having formed his plans, strictly adhere to his resolutions and principles, not being careful at one time, and self-indulgent at others, for by so doing, he would gain but little benefit; but taking care always to avoid excess, which any man can certainly do at all times, and under all circumstances, if he is determined. I say then, that he who thus lives cannot be sick, or but seldom, and for a short time, because, by regular living, he destroys every seed of sickness, and thus, by removing the cause, prevents the effect; so that he who pursues a regular and strictly moderate life, need not fear illness, for his blood having become pure, and free from all bad humors, it is not possible that he can fall sick.

Quantity rather than quality for many

Since, therefore, it appears that a regular life is also profitable and virtuous, it ought to be universally followed, and more so, as it does not clash with duties of any kind, but is easy to all. Neither is it necessary that all should eat as little as I do--twelve ounces--or not to eat of many things from which I, because of the natural weakness of my stomach, abstain. Those with whom all kinds of food agree, may eat of such, only they are forbidden to eat a greater quantity, even of that which agrees with them best, than their stomachs can with ease digest. The same is to be understood of drink. The only rule for such to observe in eating and drinking, is the quantity rather than the quality; but for those who, like myself, are weak of constitution, these must not only be careful as to quantity, but also to quality, partaking only of such things as are simple, and easy to digest.

Let no one tell me that there are numbers, who, though they live most irregularly, attain in health and spirits to a great age. This argument is grounded on uncertainty and hazard, and such cases are rare. Men should not, therefore, because of these exceptional cases, be persuaded to irregularity or indulgence. Whoever, trusting to the strength of his constitution, slights these observations, may expect to suffer by so doing, and to live in constant danger of disease and death. I therefore affirm, that a man, even of a bad constitution, who leads a strictly regular and sober life, is surer of a long one, than he of the best constitution who lives carelessly and irregularly.

If men have a mind to live long and healthy, and die without sickness of body or mind, but by mere dissolution, they must submit to a regular and abstemious life, for such a life keeps the blood clean and pure. It suffers no vapors to ascend from the stomach to the head; hence, the brain of him who thus lives enjoys constant serenity; he can soar above the low and groveling concerns of this life to the exalted and beautiful contemplation of heavenly things to his exceeding comfort and satisfaction. He then truly discerns the brutality of those excesses into which men fall, and which bring them misery here and hereafter; while he may with comfort look forward to a long life, conscious that, through the mercy of God, he has relinquished the paths of vice and intemperance, never again to enter them; and, through the merits of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to die in His favor.

He therefore does not suffer himself to be cast down with the thoughts of death, knowing that it will not attack him violently, or by surprise, or with sharp pains and feverish sensations, but will come upon him with ease and gentleness; like a lamp, the oil of which is exhausted, he will pass gently, and without any sickness, from this terrestrial and mortal, to a celestial and eternal life.

Some sensual unthinking persons affirm that a long life is no great blessing, and that the state of a man, who has passed his seventy-fifth year, cannot really be called life; but this is wrong, as I shall fully prove; and it is my sincere wish, that all men would endeavor to attain my age, that they might enjoy that period of life, which of all others is most desirable.

A true relish for life!

I will therefore give an account of my recreations, and the relish which I find at this stage of life. There are many who can give testimony as to the happiness of my life. In the first place, they see with astonishment the good state of my health and spirits; how I mount my horse without assistance, how I not only ascend a flight of stairs, but can climb a hill with greatest ease.

Then, how gay and good-humored I am; my mind ever undisturbed, in fact, joy and peace having fixed there above in my breast. Moreover, they know in what manner I spend my time, so as never to find life weary: I pass my hours in great delight and pleasure, in converse with men of good sense and intellectual culture; then, when I cannot enjoy their company, I betake myself to the reading of some good book. When I have read as much as I like, I write; endeavoring in this, as in other things to be of service to others; and these things I do with the greatest ease to myself, living in a pleasant house in the most beautiful quarter of this noble city of Padua.

Besides this house, I have my gardens, supplied with pleasant streams in which I always find something to do which amuses me. Nor are my recreations rendered less agreeable by the failing of any of my senses, for they are all, thank God, perfect, particularly my palate, which now relishes better the simple fare I have, than it formerly did the most delicate dishes, when I led an irregular life. Nor does the change of beds give me any uneasiness: I can sleep everywhere soundly and quietly, and my dreams are pleasant and delightful.

It is likewise with the greatest pleasure I behold the success of an undertaking so important to this state; I mean that of draining and improving so many uncultivated pieces of ground, an undertaking begun within my memory, but which I thought I should never see completed; nevertheless I have, and was even in person assisting in the work for two months together, in those marshy places during the heat in summer, without ever finding myself worse for the fatigues or inconveniences I suffered; of so much efficacy is that orderly life, which I everywhere constantly lead.

Such are some of the recreations and diversions of my old age, which is so much the more to be valued than the old age, or even the youth of other men; as, being freed by God's grace from the perturbations of the mind and the infirmities of the body, I no longer experience any of those contrary emotions which rack such a number of young men and as many old ones, who, by reason of their careless living and intemperate habits, are destitute of health and strength, and consequently of all true enjoyment. And if it be lawful to compare little matters to affairs of importance, I will further venture to say that such are the effects of this sober life, that, at my present age of eighty-three, I have been able to write an entertaining comedy, abounding with innocent mirth and pleasant jests.

I have yet another comfort which I will mention; that of seeing a kind of immortality in a succession of descendants; for, as often as I return home, I find before me, not one or two, but eleven grandchildren, the oldest of them eighteen, all the offspring of one father and mother, and all blessed with good health. Some of the youngest I play with; those older, I make companions of; and, as nature has bestowed good voices upon them, I amuse myself by hearing them sing, and play on different instruments. Nay, I sing myself, as I have a better voice now, clearer and louder, than at any period of my life. Such are the recreations of my old age.

Wouldn't change for anything

Whence it appears, that the life I lead is not gloomy, but cheerful, and I would not exchange my manner of living and my gray hairs, with that of even a young man, having the best constitution, who gave way to his appetites; knowing, as I do, that such are daily subject to a thousand kinds of ailments and death. I remember my own conduct in early life, and I know how foolhardy are young men; how apt they are to presume on their strength in all their actions, and by reason of their little experience, are over-sanguine in their expectations. Hence, they often expose themselves rashly to every kind of danger, and, banishing reason, bow their necks to the yoke of concupiscence, and endeavor to gratify all their appetites, not minding, fools as they are, that they thereby hasten the approach of what they would most willingly avoid, sickness and death.

And these are two great evils to all men who live a free life; the one is troublesome and painful, the other, dreadful and insupportable, especially when they reflect on the errors to which this mortal life is subject, and on the vengeance which the justice of God is wont to take on sinners. Whereas, I, in my old age, praise to the Almighty, am exempt from these torments; from the first, because I cannot fall sick, having removed all the cause of illness by my regularity and moderation; from the other, that of death, because from so many years' experience, I have learned to obey reason; whereas, I not only think it a great folly to fear that which cannot be avoided, but likewise firmly expect some consolation from the grace of Jesus Christ, when I arrive at that period.

But though I know I must, like others, reach that term, it is yet at so great a distance that I cannot discern it, because I know I shall not die except by mere dissolution, having already, by my regular course of life, shut up all other avenues of death, and thus prevented the humors of my body making any other way upon me, than that which I must expect from the elements employed in the composition of this mortal frame.

I am not so simple as not to know that, as I was born, so I must die; but the natural death that I speak of does not overtake one, until after a long course of years; and even then, I do not expect the pain and agony which most men suffer when they die. But I, by God's blessing, reckon that I have still a long time to live in health and spirits, and enjoy this beautiful world, which is, indeed, beautiful to those who know how to make it so, but its beauty can only be realized by those who, by reason of temperance and virtue, enjoy sound health of body and mind.

Now, if this sober and moderate manner of living brings so much happiness; if the blessings that attend it are so stable and permanent, then I beseech every man of sound judgment to embrace this valuable treasure, that of a long and healthful life, a treasure which exceeds all other worldly blessings, and, therefore, should be sought after; for what is wealth and abundance to a man who is possessed with a feeble and sickly body? This is that divine sobriety, agreeable to God, the friend of nature, the daughter of reason, the sister of all the virtues, the companion of temperate living, modest, courteous, content with little, regular, and perfectly mistress of all her operations. From her, as from their proper root, spring life, health, cheerfulness, industry, learning and all those actions and employments worthy of noble and generous minds.

The laws of God are all in her favor. Repletion, excess, intemperance, superfluous humors, diseases, fevers, pains and the dangers of death, vanish in her presence, as mists before the sun. Her comeliness ravishes every well-disposed mind. Her influence is so sure, as to promise to all a long and agreeable life. And, lastly, she promises to be a mild and pleasant guardian of life teaching how to ward off the attacks of death. Strict sobriety, in eating and drinking, renders the senses and understanding clear, the memory tenacious, the body lively and strong, the movements regular and easy; and the soul, feeling so little of her earthly burden, experiences much of her natural liberty. The man thus enjoys a pleasing and agreeable harmony, there being nothing in his system to disturb; for his blood is pure, and runs freely through his veins, and the heat of his body is mild and temperate.

P.S. I hope you found this book as inspiring as I did.

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