

11th Annual Art & Science of Aging Conference – Resilience: The Bright Side of Aging, February 19, 2016, DeVos Campus, G.V.S.U.

Morning Session: Grace as Resilience: Lessons from Ancient Eastern and Western Philosophers (by Professors Geling Shang and Teresa Castelão-Lawless, Philosophy Department, G.V.S.U.)

“CICERO AND SENECA ON SUCCESSFUL AGING: IS LIFE REALLY *THAT* SHORT AND IS THE LIFE OF AN OLD AGE REALLY *THAT* USELESS” (Teresa Castelão-Lawless)

CICERO ON DISPELING MYTHS ABOUT OLD AGE

“Life’s course is invariable – nature has one path only, and you cannot travel along it more than once. Every stage of life has its own characteristics: boys are feeble, youths in their prime are aggressive, middle-aged men are dignified, old people are mature. Each of these qualities is ordained by nature for harvesting in due season”

MYTHS:

1. Old age takes a person away from activities
2. Old age weakens the memory
3. Old age is lacking in pleasures
4. Old age is not far from death

SENECA ON RECLAIMING OLD AGE

“What’s become of me if stones of my own age are crumbling like that?... My old age was made clear to me at every turn”

How existence can be long but life “wasted”:

1. We live as if we were immortal

2. **We live for the sake of others**
3. **We live for the sake of one's own useless pursuits**
4. **We are not aware of the difference between "to live" and "to exist"**
5. **Those we think ought to feel happy complain endlessly but do not change**
6. **Perpetual postponement**
7. **We are attracted by "empty subjects"**

How to reclaim life in old age:

1. **Do not complain about Nature**
2. **Do not let others "trespass" on your life**
3. **Take part of your time for yourself**
4. **Do not let yourself trespass on your own life**
5. **Have consciousness of your own mortality**
6. **Have consciousness of the nature of the human journey**

7. **Know that life has only 3 periods: past, present, future**

8. **In leisure take time for philosophy/improvement of the mind**

9. **Keep yourself in the “company of intimate friends every day”**

Advice on retirement

1. **Conceal it!**

2. **Do not boast about being retired**

3. **Have no urge to take up public life**

4. **Do not waste your life on “busy idleness”**

5. **Value qualitative leisure and the pursuit of wisdom**

6. **Be the master of your own time**

“Lessons from Ancient Eastern Philosophers: Confucius, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu” (Geling Shang)

From Confucius *Analects*, Chapter 2:4,

Confucius said, “At the age fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character has been formed [or established myself]. At forty I had no perplexities. At fifty I knew the mandate of heaven. At sixty my ears became smooth [or at ease with whatever I heard]. At seventy I could follow my heart do whatever I desire without transgressing regularities.”

From Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 8,

The highest good is like water. The water benefits all things yet does not compete with others and is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near to the Way.

Chapter 9,

Stretch a bow to the very full, and you will wish you had stopped in time; temper a sword-edge to its very sharpest, and you will find it soon grows dull. When bronze and jade fill your hall, it can no longer be guarded. Wealth and place breed insolence that brings ruin in its train. When your work is done, then withdraw! Such is Heaven’s Way.

From the *Book of Chuang Tzu*, chapter 4,

Tzu-ch’I of Nan-po was wandering around the Hill of Shang when he saw a huge tree there, different from all the rest. A thousand teams of horses could have taken shelter under it and its shade would have covered them all. Tzu-ch’I said, “What tree is this? It must certainly have some extraordinary usefulness!” But, looking up, he saw that the smaller limbs were gnarled and twisted, unfit for beams or rafters, and looking down, he saw that the trunk was pitted and rotten and could not be used for coffins. He licked one of the leaves and blistered his mouth and made sore. He sniffed the odor and it was enough to make a man drunk for three days. “It turns out to be a complete useless tree,” said Tzu-ch’I, “and so it has been able to grow this big. Aha! – it is this uselessness that the Holy Man makes use of!”

The mountain trees do themselves harm; the grease in the torch burns itself up. The cinnamon can be eaten and so it gets cut down; the lacquer tree can be used and so it gets hacked apart. All men know the use of the useful, but nobody knows the use of the useless.