Montaigne

We must learn to suffer whatever we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of discords as well as of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only some of them, what could he sing? He has got to know how to use all of them and blend them together. So too must we with good and ill, which are of one substance with our life. Without such blending our being cannot be: one category is no less necessary than the other. To assay kicking against natural necessity is to reproduce the mad deed of Ctesiphon who, to a kicking-match, challenged his mule."

"I do not go in much for consultations over such deterioration as I feel: once those medical fellows have you at their mercy they boss you about: they batter your ears with their prognostics. Once, taking advantage of me when I was weak and ill, they abused me with their dogmas and their masterly [C] frowns, [B] threatening me with great suffering and then with imminent death. They did not succeed in knocking me down or dislodging me from my fortress, but I was jolted and jostled: my judgement was neither changed nor troubled by them but it was at least preoccupied, and that means so much agitation and strife. I treat my imagination as gently as I am able, freeing it if I can from the load of any pain and conflict. Anyone who can should help it, stroke it, mislead it. My wit is well suited to such service: it never runs out of specious arguments about anything. If it could convince as well as it preaches its help would be most welcome.

Would you like an example? It tells me: that it is for my own good; that
I have the gravel; that structures as old as I am are naturally subject to seepage (it is time they began to totter apart and decay; that is a common necessity, otherwise would not some new miracle have been performed just for me? I am paying the debt due to old age and could not get off more lightly); that I should be consoled by the fact that I have company, since I have fallen into the most routine illness for men of my age (on all sides I can see men afflicted by a malady of the same nature as mine and their companionship honours me since that malady willingly strikes the aristocracy: its essence is noble and dignified); and that, of the men who are stricken with it few get off more lightly — and even then it is at the cost of having the bother of following a nasty diet and of taking troublesome daily doses of medicine, whereas I owe everything to my good fortune. (As for the few routine concoctions of cryngo or burstwort which I have swallowed twice or thrice thanks to those ladies who gave me half of their own to drink (their courtesy exceeding in degree the pain of my complaint) they seemed to me to be as easy to take as they were ineffectual in practice. For that easy and abundant discharge of gravel which I have often been vouchsafed by the bounty of Nature, those men had to pay a thousand vows to Aesculapius and as many crowns to their doctor. [C] (In normal company my comportment remains decorous, even, and is untroubled by my illness; and I can hold my urine for ten hours at a time — as long as the next man.)

[B] "The fear of this illness," (to go on), "used to terrify you: that was when it was unknown to you; the screams and distress of those who make the pain more acute by their unwillingness to bear it engendered a horror of it in you. This illness afflicts those members of yours by which you have most erred. You are a man with some sense of right and wrong:

Quae venit indigne pæna, dolenda venit.

[Only punishment undeserved comes with cause for anger.] 101

Reflect on this chastisement: it is mild indeed compared with others and shows a Fatherly kindness. 102 Reflect on how late it appeared: having first
made a compact by which it gave free-play to the excesses and pleasures of your youth, it occupies with its vexations only that season of your life which, willy-nilly, is sterile and forlorn. The fear and pity felt by people for this illness gives you something to glory about (you may have purged your judgement and cured your reason of such glorying, but those who love you still recognize some stain of it within your complexion). There is pleasure in hearing them say about you: “There’s fortitude for you! There’s long-suffering!” They see you sweating under the strain, turning pale, flushing, trembling, sicking up everything including blood, suffering curious spasms and convulsions, sometimes shedding huge tears from your eyes, excreting frightening kinds of urine, thick and black, or finding that they are retained by some sharp stone, bristling with spikes which cruelly jab into the neck of your prick and skin it bare: you, meanwhile, chat with those about you, keeping your usual expression, occasionally clowning about with your servants,103 defending your corner in a tense argument, apologizing for any sign of pain and understating your suffering.

‘Do you remember those men of yore who greatly hungered after ills so as to keep their virtue in trim and practise it? Supposing Nature is pushing and shoving you into that proud Sect into which you would never have entered on your own! If you tell me that yours is a dangerous, killing affliction, which of the others is not? For it is medical hocus-pocus to pick out some and say that they do not follow a direct line towards death: what does it matter if they only lead there incidentally, floundering along by-ways in the same direction as the road which leads us thither? You are not dying because you are ill: you are dying because you are alive;108 Death can kill you well enough without illness to help her. In some cases illnesses have postponed death, the sick living longer precisely because they thought they were a-dying; besides, just as there are some wounds which cure you or make you better, so too there are some illnesses. Your colic is often no less tenacious of life than you are: we know of men in whom it has lasted from childhood to extreme old age; and it would have gone along with them further if they themselves had not deserted its company. Men kill the stone more than it
kills men. And if it did present you with the idea of imminent death, would it not be doing a good turn to a man of your age to bring him to meditate upon his end?

[C] 'And the worst of it is you have nobody left to be cured for. As soon as she likes, whatever you do, our common Fate is summoning you. [B] Reflect on how skilfully and gently your colic makes you lose your taste for life and detaches you from the world — not compelling you by some tyrannous subjection as do so many other afflictions found in old men which keep them continually fettered to weakness and unremittingly in pain but with intermittent warnings and counsels interspersed with long periods of respite, as if to give you the means to meditate on its lesson and to go over it again at leisure. And so as to give you the means to make a sound judgement and to be resolved like a sensible man, it shows you the state of the whole human condition, both good and bad, shows you, during one single day, a life at times full of great joy, at times unbearable. Although you may not throw your arms about Death's neck, you do, once a month, shake her by the hand. [C] That gives you more reason to hope that Death will snatch you one day without warning and that, having so often brought you as far as the jetty, one morning, unexpectedly, when you are trusting that you are still on the usual terms, you and your trust will have crossed the Styx. [B] You have no need to complain of illnesses which share their time fairly with health.

'I am obliged to Fortune for the fact that she so often uses the same sort of weapons to assail me: she forms me and schools me for them by habit, hardens me and makes me used to them: I more or less know now what it will cost me to be released from what I owe them. [C] (Lacking a natural memory I forge one from paper: whenever some new feature occurs in my affliction, I jot it down. And so by now, when I have gone through virtually every category of examples of such symptoms, whenever some appalling crisis threatens me I can without fail, by flipping through my notes (which are as loose as the leaves of the Sybils), find grounds for consolation in some favourable prognosis based on past experience.) [B] Such habituation helps me to hope for better things in the future: this way of voiding the stone has continued for such a long time now that it is probable that Nature will not change the way of it and that nothing worse will happen than what I already know.

Moreover the properties of this Affliction of mine are not ill-suited to my complexion, which is quick and sudden. It is when she makes mild assaults on me that she frightens me, for that means a long spell: yet she is by nature a thing of violent and audacious bouts, giving me a thorough
shaking up for a day or two. My kidneys held out for [C] an age [B] without deterioration: it will soon be [C] another age, now. [H] since they changed their condition. Ills as well as blessings run their courses. Perhaps this misfortune is near its end. Old age reduces the heat of my stomach, which therefore digests things less perfectly and dispatches waste matter to my kidneys: so why should the heat of my kidneys, after a stated period has rolled by, not similarly be reduced, rendering them unable to continue to petrify my phlegm and obliging Nature to find some other means of purging it? It is clear that the passing years have exhausted some of my discharges: why not then those excretions which furnish the raw material for my gravel?

'But is there anything so delightful as that sudden revolution when I pass from the extreme pain of voiding my stone and recover, in a flash, the beauteous light of health, full and free, as happens when our colic paroxysms are at their sharpest and most sudden? Is there anything in that suffered pain which can outweigh the joy of so prompt a recovery? Oh how much more beautiful health looks to me after illness, when they are such close neighbours that I can study both, each in her full armour, each in each other's presence, defying each other as though intending to stubborn it out and hold their ground. The Stoics say that the vices were introduced for a purpose - to second virtue and make her prized: we can say, with better justification and less bold conjecture, that Nature has lent us suffering in order that it may honour and serve the purposes of pleasure and of mere absence of pain. When Socrates was freed from the load of his fetters he enjoyed the delicate tingling in his legs that their pressure had produced and he delighted in thinking about the close confederacy that there is between pain and pleasure, so bound together in fellowship as they are by bonds of necessity that they succeed each other and mutually produce each other; and he exclaimed that that excellent man Aesop ought to have drawn from such factors the substance of a beautiful fable.'

'For the worst feature of other maladies is that they are less grievous in what they do at the time than in what comes later: you spend a whole year convalescing, all the time full of fear and debility. There is so much hazard in recovery, so many levels involved, that there is no end to it all: before they let you strip off your scarves and then your nightcaps, before they have allowed you to avail yourself again of fresh air, wine, your wife - and of melons - it is quite something if you have not had a relapse into some
new wretchedness. My illness is privileged to make a clean break: the others lend each other a hand; they always leave some dent and weakness in you which render your body susceptible to some fresh woe. We can condone such illnesses as are content with their own rights-of-possession over us without introducing their brood: but those whose journey through us produces some useful result are courteous and gracious. Since my stone I find that I have been freed from the load of other ailments and that I seem to feel better than I did before. I have not had a temperature since! I reason that the frequent and extreme vomiting which I suffer purges me and that, from another aspect, the losses of appetite and bizarre fastings which I go through disperse my offending humours, Nature voiding with those stones all her noxious superfluities. And do not tell me that such medicine is bought at too high a price. What about those stinking possets, those cauterizations, incisions, sweat-baths, drainings of pus, diets and those many forms of treatment which often bring death upon us when we cannot withstand their untimely onslaught! So when I suffer an attack I consider it to be a cure: when freed from it, I consider that to be a durable and complete deliverance.

'Another specific blessing of my illness is that it all but gets on with its own business and (unless I lose heart) lets me get on with mine. I have withstood it, at the height of an attack, for ten hours at a time in the saddle. "Just put up with it, that's all! You need no other prescription: enjoy your sports, dine, ride, do anything at all if you can: your indulgences will do you more good than harm." Try saying that to a man with syphilis, the gout or a rupture! The constraints of other illnesses are more all-embracing; they are far more restricting on our activities, upsetting our normal ways of doing anything and requiring us to take account of them throughout the entire state of our lives. Mine does no more than pinch the epidermis: it leaves you free to dispose of your wit and your will as well as of your tongue, your hands and your feet. Rather than battering you numb, it stimulates you. It is your soul which is attacked by a burning fever, cast to the ground by epilepsy, dislodged by an intense migraine and, in short, struck senseless by those illnesses which attack all the humours and the nobler organs. Such are not attacked in my case: if things go ill for my soul, too bad for her! She is betraying, surrendering and disarming herself. Only fools let themselves be persuaded that a solid, massy substance concocted within our kidneys can be dissolved by draughts of medicine. So, once it starts to move, all you can do is to grant it right of passage: it will take it anyway.

'There is another specific advantage that I have noticed: it is an illness
which does not leave us guessing. It dispenses us from the turmoil into which other ills cast us because of uncertainties about their causes, properties and development – an infinitely distressing turmoil. We need have nothing to do with consulting specialists and hearing their opinions: our senses can show us what it is and where it is.'

With such arguments, both strong and feeble, I try, as Cicero did with that affliction which was his old age, to benumb and delude my power of thought and to put ointment on its wounds. And tomorrow, if they grow worse, we will provide other escape-routes for them.

[C] To show that that is true, since I wrote that, the slightest movements which I make have begun to squeeze pure blood from my kidneys again. Yet because of that I do not stop moving about exactly as I did before and spurring after my hounds with a youthful and immoderate zeal. And I find that I have got much the better of so important a development, which costs me no more than a dull ache and heaviness in the region of those organs. Some great stone is compressing the substance of my kidneys and eating into it: what I am voiding drop by drop – and not without some natural pleasure – is my life blood, which has become from now on some noxious and superfluous discharge.

[B] Can I feel something disintegrating? Do not expect me to waste time having my pulse and urine checked so that anxious prognostics can be drawn from them: I will be in plenty of time to feel the anguish without prolonging things by an anguished fear. [C] Anyone who is afraid of suffering suffers already of being afraid. And then the hesitation and ignorance of those who undertake to explain the principles by which Nature operates and her inner progression (as well as the false prognoses of their Art) oblige us to recognize that she keeps her processes absolutely unknown. In her promises and threats there is great uncertainty, variability and obscurity. With the exception of old age (which is an undoubted prognostic of the approach of death), in all our other maladies I can find few prognostics of the future on which we should base our predictions. [B] Judgements about myself I make from true sensation not from argument: what else, since all I intend to bring to bear are patience and endurance. 'What do I gain from that,' do you ask? Look at those who act otherwise and who rely on all that contradictory counsel and advice. How often does their imagination assail them, independently of the body! When safely delivered from a dangerous bout, I have often found pleasure in consulting doctors about it as though it were just starting. Fully at ease I would put up with the formulation of their terrifying diagnoses, and would remain that much more indebted to God for his mercy and better instructed in the vanity of that Art.
There is nothing which ought to be commended to youth more than being active and energetic. Our life is but motion: I am hard to budge and sluggish about everything, including getting up, going to bed and eating. For me, seven o’clock is early morning! And where I head the household I never lunch before eleven nor have supper after six. The causes of those feverish ailments which I formerly used to fall into I once ascribed to the heaviness and sluggishness brought on by prolonged sleep; and I have always regretted falling back to sleep again of a morning. [C] Plato is harder against excessive sleep than excessive drink.108

[B] I like a hard bed all to myself, indeed (as kings do) without my wife, with rather too many blankets. I never use a warming-pan, but, since I have grown old, whenever I need them they give me coverlets to warm my feet and stomach. The great Scipio was criticized for being a slug-a-bed, for no other reason, if you ask me, than that it irritated people that in him alone there was nothing to criticize.109 If I am fastidious about an item in my regimen it is more about bed than anything else: but on the whole I yield to necessity as well as anyone [C] and adjust to it. [B] Sleeping has taken up a large slice of my life and even at my age I can sleep eight or nine hours at a stretch. I am finding it useful to rid myself of this propensity towards laziness and am clearly the better for it. I am feeling the shock of such a revolution, but only for two or three days. And I know hardly anyone who can do with less sleep when the need arises, who can keep on working more continuously or feel less than I do the weight of the drudgery of war. My body is capable of sustained exertions but not of sudden, violent ones. I avoid nowadays all violent activities including those which bring on sweat: before my limbs get hot they feel exhausted. I can be on my feet all day, and I never tire when walking. Over paved roads however, [C] since my earliest childhood [B] I have always preferred to go by horse!110 when on foot I splatter mud right up to my backside; and in our streets little men are liable to being jostled [C] and elbowed aside, [B] for want of an imposing appearance. And I have always liked to rest, lying or seated, with my legs at least as high as the bench.