

“In these times,” says former U.S. Poet Laureate, David Pinsky, reflecting on the world after September 11, “we’re encouraged to be cautious, but not frightened; to be courageous, but not foolhardy; to be steadfast, but not stubborn. In other words, the wisdom seems to be: take the prudent middle ground in our actions and in how we deal with our emotions. Can anyone make poetry out of the middle way? Can anyone be lyrical about moderation? Yes, the ancient roman poet, Horace. Here’s one of Horace’s poems as translated by David Ferry:”

To Licinius

You’ll do better, Licinius, not to spend your life
Venturing too far out on the dangerous waters,
Or else, for fear of storms, staying too close in
To the dangerous rocky shoreline. That man does best
Who chooses the middle way so he doesn’t end up
Living under a roof that’s going to ruin
Or in some gorgeous mansion everyone envies.
The tallest pine shakes most in a wind storm;
The loftiest tower falls down with the loudest crash;
The lightning bolt heads straight for the mountaintop.
Always expect reversals; be hopeful in trouble;
Be worried when things go well. That’s how it is
For the man whose heart is ready for anything.
It’s true that Jupiter brings on the hard winters;
It’s also true that Jupiter takes them away.
If things are bad right now, they won’t always be.
Apollo isn’t always drawing his bow;
There are times when he takes up his lyre and plays,
And awakens the music sleeping upon the strings.
Be resolute when things are going against you,
But shorten sail when the fair wind blows too strong.

(Horace, *Odes II*, 10, translated by David Ferry.)