

MONTAIGNE'S GHOST WRITER

By

Dan Conley

OVERVIEW

We Americans are glorious hypocrites. When government is deadlocked, we become enraged at the political games. “Why can’t they come to a compromise?” we shout. And yet, when election season comes around, which advertisement are the most effective? Those that attack politicians for being “wishy-washy,” or for “flip-flopping” on key issues. In the abstract, we salute splitting the differences, but when it comes to our representatives, well, why can’t they keep their promises? Why are they selling us out? Have they gone Washington on us?

Imagine how American life might be different with a different style of discourse. Imagine campaigns where the only promises politicians made were to change their minds frequently on key issues. Imagine corporations that ditched four-year strategic plans in favor of weekly brainstorming sessions.

This different style of discourse would spring from a new style of writing. Opinion pages of newspapers would be filled by idiosyncratic writers so unlikely to take an obvious left-right stand on any issue that you wouldn’t need the cliched counterpoint essayist. Essays would begin not with a topic sentence, but with the assumed phrase “what do I know?” They would start in one direction, then dreamlike, wander off to a new topic, sometimes in conflict with the original narrative. A series of essays by the same writer might revisit issues again and again, encouraging continual rethinking. In this style of discourse, essays would never reach completion. Rather, the writer would feel free, even obligated, to revisit and revise throughout a lifetime.

To an 8th grade English teacher, this might sound like a dystopia, a world where every painfully bad piece of writing he or she has had to grade for years came back to haunt the earth. And that's precisely why it's so hard to imagine a thinker like Michel de Montaigne in our culture, because we've systematically forbidden his style of writing, and in doing so, shut the door to a way of thinking. You won't earn admission to an elite college writing a digressive personal essay in the Montaigne style. Neither will your writing be accepted onto many op-ed pages, nor gain attention on social networks that reward forceful opinions. We're locked into a style of discourse, one that has replaced thinking with rationalizing. But if we really want to escape this predicament, we don't need eloquent Presidential speeches or better civics classes, we need to start writing differently.

My book, *MONTAIGNE'S GHOST WRITER*, is a prescriptive example of how that new discourse might work, taken from the perspective of the writer/philosopher who first proposed it. I use the essays of Montaigne as a focal point for examining not only his works, but contemporary ideas as they relate to his topics of interest. Through the 107 essays, a different Montaigne emerges from the man who has been examined in several prominent non-fiction books. My Montaigne is more than a charming, brutally honest innovator of form, he's a serious philosopher who invented a more intuitive way of examining the world that later influenced Francis Bacon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, C.G. Chesterton and William James. And now, this approach to philosophy is gaining new attention thanks to advances in neuroscience and the behavioral sciences.

Numerous psychological studies have found that our gut reactions to political issues are deeply emotional, and as someone who has worked for decades as a political rhetorician, I can attest that American politics is ruled by emotion. We're averse to listening to information and opinions that conflicts with our core emotional beliefs. The interesting truth is that being better informed doesn't make us less emotional about politics either, it only improves our ability to rationalize our responses, to explain away conflicting information or to find fault with the messenger. In the torrent of information that defines our age, a rationalized response to any event is all too easy to construct. And this core aspect of the human psyche -- the predominance of emotions, backed by rationalization -- holds true beyond politics. It affects our views of religion, sex, family life and nearly every facet of our culture.

Contrary to cliché, education is not the answer and the reason is obvious: reason itself. We teach children from a young age to construct fortresses of reason around their gut impulses, to reach to a conclusion first and then communicate a rationalization of it. Our speeches, editorials, business plans and, yes, book proposals are filled with Aristotle's three main points, giving weight to conclusions reached long before we construct the arguments we hope will convince others. Then we go through great pains to avoid contradicting ourselves or examining evidence to the contrary of our findings. Don't weaken your argument, we're told; raise an objection only to knock it down.

This is the world I've lived and worked in for a quarter century. As a professional speechwriter for politicians, corporate leaders and non-profit executives, I've mastered the contemporary three-main points, rhetorical frames, sound bites and applause lines

form of discourse. As is often typical of this profession, I held far more interesting jobs in my youth than I have in middle age. I was the chief speechwriter for Virginia Governor Doug Wilder when I was only 26 years old. After his term of office ended three years later, I soon became Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley's speechwriter. I loved political speechwriting, but it wasn't then (and still isn't) a terribly lucrative profession.

So by the time I'd reached by mid 40s, and was married, with three boys still in diapers, I was holding down a far less interesting, but reasonably well paying job as a speechwriter at a Chicago-based nonprofit organization. The day-to-day grind of this work, combined with intellectual diet of rhetorical writing, left me feeling malnourished and disquiet. I found the depth of thought and feeling possible in literature, poetry and even philosophy missing in our most common and popular forms of communication.

I read in Sarah Bakewell's charming book *How to Live* that Montaigne's body of work has "no great meaning, no point to make, no argument to advance. It does not have designs on you; you can do as you please with it." This spoke to me, and so I decided to do with Montaigne what I pleased. I charted his course through all 107 essays — one essay a day, each first draft published online — following his diversions, mind changes and indulgent, loving descriptions of war horses.

By marking the same ground as the world's first essayist, and slowly, often grudgingly, revealing bits of myself as any sincere Montaigne reader eventually must, I let him seep into my consciousness. While Montaigne embarked on a journey to reveal the core of his persona, his journey was far more treacherous and terrifying than he

might have anticipated. As philosopher Charles Taylor has noted, when Montaigne sat down to write and turned to himself, he experienced terrifying inner instability. His response was to observe and catalogue his thoughts, feelings and responses. From this emerged a quite different stand towards the impermanence and uncertainty of life and humility about the limits of our reason.

In his final essay, Montaigne wrote that “Anyone who recalls the ills he has undergone, those which have threatened him and the trivial incidents which have moved him from one condition to another, makes himself thereby ready for future mutations and the exploring of his condition.” He was describing and suggesting an entirely different approach to philosophy, one that would appeal just as much to the viewer of Oprah or Dr. Phil as the University PhD candidate.

Montaigne suggests that our compulsion to find rationality in things – even to write the typical story, with a thesis and well-argued themes – is to accept a false conception of life. Our lives are not orderly and understandable and to place everything but ourselves into rational order, we lose the ability to understand the lives we live.

The goal of this book is not for me to convince you to read Montaigne, however. My purpose is to urge more writers to take up his form. It’s a clarion call for writers to fight against the tyranny of the contemporary essay and for philosophers to work harder to attract readers beyond the academy, even at the risk of alienating your peers.

As much as I am rooting for Montaigne’s form to earn a second life, the reality is that his style is foreign to modern readers and his place in the literary canon earns him

the right to idiosyncrasy. To make a case for the Montaigne style of writing and thought, I need to fit my arguments into a contemporary context.

The structure of my book, therefore, tries to place Montaigne's shifting thoughts into recognizable themes without artificially defining them. This structure suggests numerous ways that Montaigne's style continues to influence elements of our culture, while they have a weaker impact upon others. But while the skeleton is contemporary, the underlying form remains pure Montaigne – my original essay-for-essay style of approaching Montaigne remains intact.

These are not Montaigne's essays, however; they are mine. I grappled with Montaigne's themes and changing points of view and then used his thought as a jumping off point for my own thoughts on his subjects, or often my subjects that closely resembled his. I grew to think and write more like Montaigne as the project grew, but my style also borrowed from the brilliant German essayist and philosopher Walter Benjamin, who suggested in one of his essays that the ideal of the form would be composed entirely of quotations.

The end result of my project isn't quite philosophy or literary criticism. It is simply one essay of Montaigne at a time, day by day, in the form that he suggested. In the essays of my book, I offer a different way to understand and appreciate Montaigne, but more importantly, I offer an example of how one can use Montaigne to become a better writer and freer thinker. I don't pretend to be right about any of the subjects that I raise. In the spirit of Montaigne, feel free to append "but what do I know?" to the end of every

piece. In the course of this project, I only aspired to keep reading, writing and thinking.

I hope my work inspires others to do the same.

MARKETING

The New York Times Book Review declared it “Montaigne’s moment” in March 2011, and I do not believe that moment has passed. Montaigne is relevant now and will remain relevant as long as our culture is jam packed with true believers and ideological blowhards. There are only so many apocalypses a sane person, or sane nation, can take. And there’s no better anti-apocalypse writer in history than Michel de Montaigne.

The book most responsible for creating this moment is “*How to Live Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at An Answer*,” by Sarah Bakewell (October 10, 2010, Other Press.) Bakewell helped revive Montaigne’s validity for modern readers, but in doing so, she makes a much better case for appreciating Montaigne than actually reading him. Her book adds to the well-known narrative of Montaigne’s life with plenty of anecdotal color about his quirky intellectual lifestyle. Bakewell’s Montaigne is charming and he contrasts well with today’s world of specialized expertise and focused careerism.

Bakewell invites readers to turn the page and give Montaigne a psychic hug, but her work also gives those readers a pass from dipping into the original material. “How to Live” is a conventional biography, one that offers a thesis about Montaigne developed over 20 chapters with 20 questions, all adding up to an explanation of his life and work and a friendly comparison between his life’s quest and the musings of bloggers.

The more recent “*When I Am Playing with My Cat, How Do I Know That She Is Not Playing with Me?: Montaigne and Being in Touch with Life*” by Saul Frampton (March 15, 2011, Pantheon) approaches Montaigne through essays, which I believe is

the correct approach. However, his book is still more of a standard biography of Montaigne than a treatment of his essays and again gives readers an opportunity to acquire an overview knowledge of Montaigne, packaged for a 21st century reader. Frampton enjoys playing with Montaigne, but does not let him rub off on him.

“*What Do I Know?*” by Paul Kent (Beautiful, January 2011) suffers from the same problem -- instead of trying to coax readers into an understanding of how Montaigne’s way of thinking might change contemporary discourse, Kent tries to extrapolate Montaigne’s opinions to our world. Given that Montaigne’s views of numerous subjects changed frequently throughout the essays based on new conditions and his own maturing views, it’s folly to further extrapolate those views more than 500 years into the future.

There’s a place on the shelf for MONTAIGNE’S GHOST WRITER because these books have cleared space for further discussion about Montaigne. The social conditions that scream out for Montaigne’s wisdom are only getting worse as well. Other books of popular philosophy, such as *All Things Shining* by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrence Kelly (Free Press, January 4, 2011) and *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche* by James Miller (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, January 4, 2011) demonstrate a cultural desire for re-examining philosophical issues.

But it’s the contemporary essayists who are making the strongest case for using Montaigne to revolutionize our discourse. “*Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews*” by Geoff Dyer (Graywolf Press, March 29, 2011) showcases a style of writing that would make Montaigne proud. “*Reality Hunger: A*

Manifesto” by David Shields (Vintage, February 8, 2011) makes a case for a new literary form that also challenges convention. These books offer a genius’s unique eye and an innovator’s novel form, but they lack a crucial element: Montaigne’s revolutionary courage.

MONTAIGNE’S GHOST WRITER is the lynchpin of my campaign to reshape contemporary discourse, but it’s also the final piece. This project began on my website, www.danconley.com, attracting roughly 100 readers a day over the 107 day project. Readers continue to discover the original essays at www.mymontaigneproject.org, while my original website has been converted to the world’s only daily Montaigne news resource. I write a daily update of all news about Montaigne on the Internet that day, engage other writers discussing Montaigne subjects and relate events of the day to some of Montaigne’s thinking. I also maintain a Montaigne Twitter feed and Google+ page.

In addition, I will be teaching a course at the Newberry Library in Chicago in Spring 2012 on “Writing like Montaigne.” I hope to continue offering this course at the Newberry Library in future sessions and will expand it to online sites such as The Loft. Future online marketing plans include a regular Blog Talk Radio program, which will be a talk radio program about political discourse.

As a frequent contributor to Salon.com, politicalwire.com and Politico, I have built an audience among observers of the American political scene. I will continue to build my political opinion profile, but will use Montaigne and his style of writing to alter the form of my works. My 22 years of experience working with the media – including public

speaking, media relations and social media publicity – will help this project reach the largest possible audience.

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Section One: “Because it was him: Because it was me.” Love, Friendship and Family

The first section on love and friendship is entitled “Because it was him: Because it was me,” the most famous quote from his heartbreaking essay about Estienne de La Boetie. Montaigne’s popularity during the Romantic Era was due in large part to that essay. But it wouldn’t be accurate to describe Montaigne as a Romantic. His views of friendship, love and family were as offbeat as his own childhood, which was spent separated from his family until he had weaned from his nursemaid and in complete immersion in the Latin language, making him a rather odd, isolated little boy who turned into an equally odd and detached grown man. The most fascinating aspect of the essays in this section is the way Montaigne tries to break free of those early definitions of character, sometime successfully, but often with deep pain and sadness. His views of sexuality are as raw, funny and unconventional as those of Alvy Singer in Woody Allen’s “Annie Hall.”

Section Two: “They spend the whole day dancing.” Diversions

This collection of essays, about pastimes and diversions, includes some of Montaigne’s most charming works and they demonstrate the breadth of his reading interests. Montaigne’s wry point of view on subjects – which he often had to go to great

lengths to explain to Church leaders – made him seem like a Jerry Seinfeld of his era, a great observer of nonsensical customs and mores.

Section Three: “Nature leads us by the hand down a gentle slope.” Death

Here Montaigne writes in depth about death – and these works show a man learning to deal with great loss (in addition to La Boetie, Montaigne also lost both of his parents and three young children during this span of year) but also learning and changing from the experience. This is Montaigne at his self-help best, and the advice he gives would be very much at home on an episode of Oprah or Dr. Phil while retaining serious philosophic depth.

Section Four: “To seize us and to grip us in her claws” Politics and Strategy

An often-neglected aspect of Montaigne’s body of work is his political philosophy. Drawing on his own political experience and his unique reading of military history, Montaigne offers extensive advice about political strategies and tactics and develops a surprisingly complete theory of governing power and authority. To this day, there are theories that the most controversial writing of La Boetie was actually ghostwritten by Montaigne. Those theories seem implausible to me – but there is sufficient evidence within the essays about Montaigne’s own anarchist leanings to suggest that he shared his dear friend’s deep distrust of the state in all of its forms. Despite the radical subtext, Montaigne was deeply opposed to the sectarian political disputes of his day and served as a genuine political conservative of his day. His opposition to radical social theories

and belief in incremental customs-based change would seem out of date in our age of heated, polarized red/blue politics. On the other hand, he was probably a fish out of water in his own day as well.

Section Five: “We argue about the branches” Religion

Another controversial aspect of the Montaigne corpus is his views of religion, which is the subject of section five entitled “We argue about the branches.” Even though Montaigne’s work was banned in France for more than a century, Montaigne’s faith was clearly stated and defended throughout the essays and in some important ways, his view of Christian Theology anticipated the writings of Soren Kierkegaard. This is another unique Montaigne persona – the open-minded man of faith – in short supply in our culture, one that our age of secularism could learn from still.

Section Six: “The language of their nanny” Role Models

This section includes numerous Montaigne essays about exempla. These essays are some of the best examples of Montaigne’s shifting worldview of the course of his writing project – while he began with fairly straightforward accounts of historical role models, taken almost verbatim from Plutarch, the later essays reveal a strong streak of skepticism about the lessons that supposed Great Men can teach us. Montaigne comes to believe that the most valuable life lessons can only be learned through experience. He becomes, in a sense, a moral biographer, a writer less

interested in how ambitious people can instruct us than in how we can learn from our own moral choices.

Section Seven: “Experience constructs an art” Philosophy

These longest -- and in my view most important -- essays examine the limitations of Stoic philosophy. In these pieces, Montaigne slowly develops a new form of philosophy that places a greater emphasis on personal experience than on rational contemplation. In this section, I bring the philosophical discussion up to date by incorporating sources who developed Montaigne’s ideas in the centuries since his work. I also use this section to develop my own thoughts about major philosophic themes of modern philosophy and how they relate to my own story. In the process, I attempt to relate philosophic concepts in a more understandable vernacular for lay readers, just as Montaigne did with the philosophy of his era.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Section One: “Because it was him; Because it was me.”

Love, Friendship and Family

Where are the philosophers of friendship, love, family and sex? Why are our discussions of these subjects always about our animal nature and our romantic ideals? Why do these subjects make us so squeamish?

Montaigne offered a different path -- one that's impossible to follow directly. Sure, it's possible to read Montaigne's approaches to love, friendship and family and find an ethos, and maybe you can even attempt to follow it. But that would be insanity, because no one shared Montaigne's experiences and he would never suggest anyone take his exact same approach to life.

What Montaigne suggested is a course of brutal honesty about the way we live and relate to one another. Don't hold anything back -- speak truthfully about desires and feelings, and don't be afraid to contradict yourself wildly. It's the act of sharing and expressing that helps us to understand the subjectivity of our views.

Of all the aspects of Montaigne's life that he assayed, his views of love, friendship and family feel most comfortable for modern readers. We live in an age where these conversations aren't as scandalous as they were in Victorian England or Puritan New England. The big difference, however, is that Montaigne's view of these subjects is morality free. He doesn't offer judgments of others' decisions or viewpoints, he merely offers his own.

The so-called Culture Wars of contemporary America feature different types of moralists on both sides. Montaigne wrote a great deal about the perils of legislating morality -- he believed in cultural change from the ground up -- and I'll touch upon that subject later in the section about Montaigne's political philosophy.

Try not to think about cultural morality for now and just enjoy Montaigne at his eclectic, bawdy best. Its in these essays where Montaigne most clearly defines his personality ... and where he first hooked generations of readers.

Montaigne and Howard Stern: On the power of the imagination

Where do you start with a book about Michel de Montaigne's essays? The anthropologist would argue for his "Cannibals" essay. The Romantics would want to start with his beautiful tribute to Estienne de La Boetie. The theologian might jump right into his massive treatment of Raymond Sebond. As for me, I think the best place to begin is with his penis.

Not exactly his penis, actually, but all of them. Cloaked within a more general discussion of human imagination and psychosomatic disorders, his essay "On the power of the imagination" gives us a lengthy treatment of erectile dysfunction and why men should not blame sorcery for their failure to perform. Blame your brain, not the witches' brew, Montaigne tells us. As an aside, towards the end of the essay, Montaigne writes:

"Were I to choose a subject where I had to be led, my capacities might prove inadequate to it."

Inadequacy is a good word for this subject. To give proper treatment to this work, I'd need the skills of the young Philip Roth or, better yet, Howard Stern. Montaigne wrote about subjects every human being could understand, appreciate and laugh about uncomfortably. It may seem like a frivolous subject for the Montaigne scholar today, but bear in mind that the essays were widely popular in his day, not only in French but also in English translation, not because the literate classes of the 16th century wanted to contemplate philosophy. The essays were popular because Montaigne was entertaining ... and often bawdy.

I dare Howard Stern to compete with this:

“We are right to note the license and disobedience of this member which thrusts itself forward so inopportunistly when we do not want it to, and which so inopportunistly lets us down when we most need it; it imperiously contests for authority with our will: it stubbornly and proudly refuses all our incitements, both mental and manual. Yet if this member were arraigned for rebelliousness, found guilty because of it and then retained me to plead its cause, I would doubtless cast suspicion on our other members for having deliberately brought a trumped-up charge, plotting to arm everybody against it and maliciously accusing it alone of a defect common to them all.”

From there, Montaigne proceeds to stage a mock trial against the penis and serves as the penis's attorney. This line-of-defense is especially brilliant, because it foreshadows mind-body arguments that rage to this day:

“Our members have emotions proper to themselves which arouse them or quieten them down without leave from us. How often do compelling facial movements

bear witness to thoughts, which we were keeping secret, so betraying us to those who are with us? The same causes which animate that member animate – without our knowledge – the heart, the lungs and the pulse: the sight of some pleasant object can imperceptibly spread right through us the flame of a feverish desire. Is it only the veins and muscles of that particular member, which rise or fall without the consent of our will or even of our very thoughts? We do not command our hair to stand on end with fear nor our flesh to quiver with desire. Our hands often go where we do not tell them; our tongues can fail, our voices congeal, when they want to. Even when we have nothing for the pot and would fain order our hunger and thirst not to do so, they never fail to stir up those members which are subject to them, just as that other appetite does: it also deserts us, inopportunately, whenever it wants to. That sphincter which serves to discharge our stomachs has dilations and contractions proper to itself, independent of our wishes or even opposed to them; so do those members which are destined to discharge the kidneys.”

That’s right, Montaigne wrote about the sphincter. Earlier there was a paragraph about farting as well. My favorite part of the essay involves a “cure” that Montaigne devised for a friend to rid him of his dysfunction. The ritual included a gold amulet, a ribbon to tie around his member and some kind of nonsense chanting. It brought to mind the variety of random rituals Annie Savoy taught Nuke LaLoosh to cure him of his pitching wildness in “Bull Durham.” Montaigne wasn’t proud of himself for these ideas, but it didn’t stop him from writing them down and publishing them anyway:

“I am opposed to all feigned and subtle actions; I hate sleight of hand not only in games but even when it serves a purpose. The way is vicious even if the deed is not.”
Maybe true, but it’s very funny and I’m sure it worked. As Crash Davis said in “Bull Durham:”

“If you believe you’re playing well because you’re getting laid, or because you’re not getting laid, or because you wear women’s underwear, then you are.”

The Wisdom Singularity: On schoolmasters' learning

Sarah Bakewell, in her 2010 Montaigne biography “How to Live,” detailed the unusual child rearing experiment that his parents attempted on him. Montaigne was separated from his parents until he had weaned himself from his nursemaid, because his father wanted Michel to live among peasants and learn a common touch. Then, when he returned home between the age of one and two, Michel was immersed in a Latin-speaking household. Since neither his father nor mother spoke the language fluently, a tutor was engaged and everyone else in the household was banned from speaking to him in any language other than Latin. What a strange atmosphere it must have been, for French to be spoken throughout the house until Michel walks into the room, at which point everyone must either switch to Latin or turn mute.

Not surprisingly, Montaigne grew up to have many opinions about education and their impact on how children are raised. “On Schoolmasters’ learning” was the first -- and for me, his thoughts remain highly relevant to pedagogical issues of our day. One of the spectacles of 2011 was the showdown between Watson, the IBM-created, trivia-obsessed supercomputer and various carbon-based, trivia-obsessed

supercomputers, better known as Jeopardy Grand Champions. The inevitable victory of the silicon geek has led to renewed fears of computer intelligence soon overtaking human intelligence.

That's not quite accurate, because there are corporations and plenty of university research dollars devoted to just such the idea, and Ray Kurzweil is an institution onto himself promoting the Singularity Utopia. One of the most thorough examinations of the Technology Singularity movement was in the New York Times last June. If you want to read an entirely positive view of Watson's triumph, you can find Kurzweil's take. For a more skeptical view, you can read Hubert Dreyfus.

Others are far better qualified to carry on the artificial intelligence debate. I'm more interested in the human intelligence angle, because I find it completely unsurprising that a computational machine would inevitably defeat a human at rote memorization, recall of facts and rapid deprogramming of linguistic syntax. Yet, we continue to consider this kind of machine-like recall "intelligence." From day one in school, children are taught to memorize and regurgitate ... and the better that they do so as a group, the more highly esteemed the school and the more sought-after the students become for higher education institutions. Turn yourself into a thinking machine, become a success; that's the basic method of our educational system. It was that way in Montaigne's age as well:

"In truth the care and fees of our parents aim only at furnishing our heads with knowledge: nobody talks about judgement or virtue.... We ought to find out not who understands most but who understands best. We work merely to fill the memory, leaving

the understanding and the sense of right and wrong empty. Just as birds sometimes go in search of grain, carrying it in their beaks without tasting it to stuff it down the beaks of their young, so too do our schoolmasters go foraging for learning in their books and merely lodge it on the tip of their lips, only to spew it out and scatter it on the wind.” To Montaigne, this form of education not only leaves out wisdom, it also turns creativity into a niche skill, rather than the apex of human intelligence.

“We know how to say, ‘This is what Cicero said’; ‘This is morality for Plato’; ‘These are the ipsissima verba of Aristotle.’ But what have we got to say? What judgements do we make? What are we doing? A parrot could talk as well as we do Whenever I ask a certain acquaintance of mine to tell me what he knows about anything, he wants to show me a book: he would not venture to tell me that he has scabs on his arse without studying his lexicon to find out the meanings of scab and of arse.”

Which, incidentally, is exactly what Watson does before it answers a question on Jeopardy! The fact that it can process the information quickly only disguises the fact that it’s a dumb piece of machinery, not a sentient “spiritual” being. But like I said before, I don’t want to pick a fight with Kurzweil here. I also do not want to pick a fight with the American education system. Critics on the right and left do far too much of that already, in my view; a little respect for people who have devoted their lives to pedagogy is in order.

In fact, I think we're probably asking our schools to do too much already. I think Montaigne takes matters too far in this essay by suggesting that some people are better off receiving no education:

“Take a peasant or a cobbler: you can see them going simply and innocently about their business, talking only of what they know: whereas these fellows, who want to rise up and fight armed with knowledge which is merely floating about on the surface of their brains, are for ever getting snarled up and entangled. Fine words break loose from them: but let somebody else apply them! They know their Galen but not their patient. They stuff your head full of prescriptions before they even understand what the case is about. They have learned the theory of everything: try and find one who can put it into practice.”

Now we are not merely to stick knowledge on to the soul: we must incorporate it into her; the soul should not be sprinkled with knowledge but steeped in it. And if knowledge does not change her and make her imperfect state better then it is preferable just to leave it alone. Knowledge is a dangerous sword; in a weak hand which does not know how to wield it it gets in its master's way and wounds him, so that it would have been better not to have studied at all.

In Montaigne's day, perhaps that was possible. But we live in a technological democracy. Good luck finding employment as a farm peasant or cobbler; without a certain level of knowledge, people are doomed to become wards of the state (and an increasingly stingy state at that.) These know-nothings also have just as much right to

vote as a PhD ... so do we really want to risk our democracy to a populace unable to understand it?

But I do agree with the crux of Montaigne's argument -- facts are fine, but making use of them is the true value of education. And mere knowledge is not enough; the more valuable cultural asset is wisdom. Given the limitations of our schools, where will that wisdom come from? The first possibility is higher educational institutions. In his 2010 book "Wisdom," Steven Hall highlights recent efforts by Tufts University to focus on applied knowledge:

"Robert J. Sternberg, current dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at (Tufts University) and a former president of the American Psychological Association, has put a three-decade academic career on the line and decided to test the idea that wisdom can be cultivated in young minds--indeed, needs to be cultivated--if the world has any hope of changing. 'We have constructed an educational system,'"Sternberg says, 'to produce people with skills to lead us in exactly the direction we don't want to go.'"

In the Tufts system, teachers are asked to do something that harkens back to the original Academy of Plato and Lyceum of Aristotle: serve as role models of wisdom. In a Socratic, show-rather-than-tell approach, teachers try to elicit new habits of thoughts in their students: how to balance competing interests in everyday decision-making tasks, how to incorporate one's moral and ethical values into one's thought processes, how to think "dialogically" (taking an other-centered approach that attempts to understand multiple viewpoints), how to think "dialectically" (understanding that a solution that is right at one time and place may well be wrong when circumstances

change), and how to become self-conscious in a positive and enlightening way, monitoring one's own thought processes and decisions through a lens of wisdom. In a wisdom-based approach to teaching, Sternberg has written, teachers "will take a much more Socratic approach to teaching than teachers customarily do" and "students will need to take a more active role in constructing their learning."

I believe that, inevitably, these kinds of role models are essential. Most will not have the opportunity to take advantage of an expensive university and its wisdom-based approach to education. But as a dedicated autodidact, I do believe that all parents and grandparents are fully capable of committing themselves to lifelong learning, to finding a greater, deeper understanding of the world long after formal education is complete. Also in "Wisdom," Hall gives the example of Benjamin Franklin's father as the kind of sage our democracy sorely needs, in every family:

"As Franklin pointed out in his Autobiography, his father never engaged in public affairs, and yet a steady stream of Colonial movers and shakers came to his Boston home, dined at his table, and solicited the elder's judgment in matters related to church, state, and life in general ("he was also much consulted by private persons about their affairs when any difficulty occurred, and frequently chosen an arbitrator between contending parties"). Indeed, the Franklin dinner table was an incubator of wisdom, crackling with edifying conversations leading to "some ingenious or useful topic for discourse" for the benefit of the children. The quality of the conversation was so exceptional that, in a phrase that would prick the ears of modern cognitive scientists, the Franklin children were brought up with a "perfect inattention" to the quality of the food

set before them; attention, after all, is the brain's way of setting priorities and deciding what is most important. Josiah Franklin was, in short, a wise man, although no one other than his son seems to have taken public note of the fact.”

Empty Space: On affectionate relationships

I've never had a friendship that compares with the one Michel de Montaigne shared with Etienne de La Boétie; in fact, Montaigne anticipated just how rare their bond was when he wrote:

“Realizing how far removed from common practice is such a friendship – and how rare it is – I do not expect to find one good judge of it.”

Writing about anyone close to us after their death is painful. But for Montaigne to describe his friendship with Boétie in these terms must have been close to unbearable: “This friendship has had no ideal to follow other than itself; no comparison but with itself. There is no one particular consideration – nor two nor three nor four nor a thousand of them – but rather some inexplicable quintessence of them all mixed up together which, having captured my will, brought it to plunge into his and lose itself and which, having captured his will, brought it to plunge and lose itself in mine with an equal hunger and emulation. I say ‘lose itself’ in very truth; we kept nothing back for ourselves: nothing was his or mine.”

For the perfect friendship which I am talking about is indivisible: each gives himself so entirely to his friend that he has nothing left to share with another: on the contrary, he grieves that he is not two-fold, three-fold or four-fold and that he does not have several souls, several wills, so that he could give them all to the one he loves.

On one level, Montaigne tries to distinguish in this essay the circumstances where such a bond is possible. He rules out the relationship between a father and child, because of its inherent inequality:

“From children to fathers it is more a matter of respect; friendship, being fostered by mutual confidences, cannot exist between them because of their excessive inequality; all the secret thoughts of fathers cannot be shared with their children for fear of begetting an unbecoming intimacy; neither can those counsels and admonitions which constitute one of the principal obligations of friendship be offered by children to their fathers.”

He also rules out the relationship of brothers, because of the constant struggle for family affections and resources between them:

“Sharing out property or dividing it up, with the wealth of one becoming the poverty of the other, can wondrously melt and weaken the solder binding brothers together. Brothers have to progress and advance by driving along the same path in the same convoy: they needs must frequently bump and jostle against each other.”

Then, he turns to romantic relationships. Sexual passion, Montaigne argues, gets in the way of a truly equal and lasting bond:

“You cannot compare with friendship the passion men feel for women, even though it is born of our own choice, nor can you put them in the same category. I must admit that the flames of passion – for I am not unacquainted with that goddess who mingles sweet bitterness with love’s cares – are more active, sharp and keen. But that fire is a rash one, fickle, fluctuating and variable; it is a feverish fire, subject to attacks

and relapses, which only gets hold of a corner of us.... sexual love is but a mad craving for something which escapes us.”

Marriage, Montaigne maintains, is a union formed for reasons that have little or nothing to do with friendship:

“As for marriage, apart from being a bargain where only the entrance is free (its duration being fettered and constrained, depending on things outside our will), it is a bargain struck for other purposes; within it you soon have to unsnarl hundreds of extraneous tangled ends, which are enough to break the thread of a living passion and to trouble its course, whereas in friendship there is no traffic or commerce but with itself.”

Finally, Montaigne rules out homosexual relationship. Specifically, he ruled out the kind of homosexual relationships that existed in ancient Greece on the grounds of inequality: there was a student/master relationship to these bonds that made the rewards for such a bond unequal and fleeting. Some modern critics have claimed that since Montaigne ruled out only the Ancient Greek model of homosexuality, perhaps he was tacitly admitting that there was a physical side to his relationship with Boétie.

I find that to be an extremely unsurprising interpretation; there’s a strong desire in higher education today to find homosexuality in the past, especially among historical figures. But I believe that this interpretation is due mainly to the discomfort that modern men feel where they read this line from Montaigne:

“ If you press me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying: ‘Because it was him: because it was me.’”

It's one of the most beautiful lines written, in any language at any time. But with the exception of rambling, drunken "I love you man" moments, contemporary men are not supposed to speak that way of their friends. But never mind the words, it's uncomfortable to imagine that feeling; it's not a sentiment a contemporary man would easily share about any loved one.

It makes me return to the first quote I shared from this essay -- that Montaigne does not expect to find one good judge of this friendship. He wrote this essay in a state of grief. He felt compelled to defend his dear friend against charges of sedition for an essay he had written about the republican form of government and the rulers of his home city of Venice. But instead of diving into the essay and proving why there was no sedition, rather he felt compelled to share his everlasting bond and only at the end dismiss the historical charges as trifling.

I think what Montaigne is really saying in this essay is the height of masculinity -- if you're going to dare to attack Boétie, you're going to have to come through me first, because there was and will forever be no distance between us. It's not just a deeply emotional and stirring essay, but also a courageous one.

But the essay has another, unexpected effect. By writing of this loss so intensely, Montaigne exposes a deep, dark hole in his heart. At the same time, because he explains in such moving detail this ideal of friendship, he makes this reader share in his darkness by pointing out that I have never felt this level of affection, that this part of the human experience has somehow escaped me. It leads me to wonder if it's even possible -- in this age when every true friend, acquaintance, coworker and family

member are bunched together on webpages and treated equally -- to form that sort of bond today. Or maybe it's just me who is missing out. I cannot answer for others.

Rivalries: Nine-and-twenty sonnets of Estienne de La Boetie

Modern editions of Montaigne's essays do not include the sonnets of Estienne de La Boetie in this chapter, only Montaigne's dedication. To me, the inclusion of his dead friend's work seems odd, like Paul McCartney singing John Lennon songs on Saturday Night Live. A tribute, sure, but in the case of Lennon and McCartney, there was rivalry as well.

Perhaps it is a modern phenomenon, but it seems to be that rivalry is an inextricable element of male friendship. Early death tends to cement an idealized memory of the friendship -- the movie "Brian's Song" serving as the template in our day. Roger Ebert tweets often today about his lost friend Gene Siskell, yet we'll always remember their disagreements most (I'm still on Gene's side about "Blue Velvet.")

If Bill Clinton had suffered a fatal heart attack during the Lewinsky controversy, no doubt Al Gore would speak fondly of him today; instead, he can barely conceal the bitterness of being second best and the one ultimately punished for President Clinton's indiscretions. Male relationships are thorny, alpha dog battles that usually contain a moment of ideal fraternity that's either remembered last or best or, in the case of one who dies too soon, is frozen in amber.

To me, there is danger in idealized human relations in all forms. When we define true love and friendship as something otherworldly, we draw a line between ourselves

and other relations that fail to meet that measure. Even worse, we can look at the ideal in comparison to our own lives and wonder what is missing, when in fact all that might be missing is a grandiose ability to conflate the good and a too easy instinct to walk away from the difficult.

Creating Space: On solitude

“It is a vile ambition in one’s retreat to want to extract glory from one’s idleness. We must do like the beasts and scuff out our tracks at the entrance to our lairs. You should no longer be concerned with what the world says of you but with what you say to yourself.”

Solitude. On a day like today, it seems like an impossible dream. Three little kids with huge personalities and an overwhelming desire to dominate my time: that’s what a weekend is for me. My wife and I are resigned to divide spare moments for ourselves -- time we use for catch-up naps or abbreviated workout sessions. But it leaves precious little time for each other.

Montaigne offers up a beautiful philosophical oasis in this essay:

“We should have wives, children, property and, above all, good health... if we can: but we should not become so attached to them that our happiness depends on them. We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum. Within it our normal conversation should be of ourselves, with ourselves, so privy that no commerce or communication with the outside world should find a place there; there

we should talk and laugh as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no followers, no menservants, so that when the occasion arises that we must lose them it should not be a new experience to do without them.”

There’s a class imperative that must be met before you can live like Montaigne: own property, and enough of it to create your own room. Then, afford to be idle, or at least not so busy so that you have time for that room behind the shop. Finally, accept detachment from your loved ones. In modern America, this too is a class statement, because only someone with the means to have nannies, maids and manservants can excuse his or herself from the massive responsibilities of life. Montaigne is not blind to this fact, and points out that a home life can consist of just as much toil as a work life: “There is hardly less torment in running a family than in running a whole country. Whenever our soul finds something to do she is there in her entirety: domestic tasks may be less important but they are no less importunate.”

Part of that responsibility today is the work life. Increasingly in life, it seems like a treadmill ... as pay rises to meet responsibilities, so too do expectations. Talent that allows you to rise to a level becomes insufficient to impress those who judge your work. As a result, there’s less appreciation for the work done and greater frustration at the lack of challenges.

Without that room of my own ... forced to work in a cube five days a week to feed by family ... I’ve found a metaphysical room in writing. It can consume my thoughts through the most deadening drudgery or while cleaning yet another dirty diaper.

Montaigne, in this most philosophical of all of his essays, calls on his readers to find a physical place, but he also understands that the locale is not enough:

“It is not enough to withdraw from the mob, not enough to go to another place: we have to withdraw from such attributes of the mob as are within us. It is our own self we have to isolate and take back into possession.”

I feel some satisfaction in my ability to withdraw from the mob. And the fact that I have been able to make that room behind the shop exist in a coffee shop, on a stationary bike or even on an “L” train to write feels satisfying as well.

But there’s one aspect of writing that keep troubling me. Even though I have had an interesting career to date, I’m hardly in position to withdraw from it. Psychologically, I need to follow Montaigne’s path. But is it, over the long run, a path I can keep up without it’s own rewards? Montaigne talks about the ideal circumstance to enter into his kind of withdrawal:

“It seems to me that solitude is more reasonable and right for those who, following the example of Thales, have devoted to the world their more active, vigorous years.... We have lived quite enough for others: let us live at least this tail-end of life for ourselves. Let us bring our thoughts and reflections back to ourselves and to our own well-being.”

I cannot for the tail-end of my life to continue this journey. I’m on this mission not because I expect it to lead anywhere, but simply because I must. In my weakest moments, I daydream that others will start to witness my wanderings and eventually,

people will pay to read my thoughts. Montaigne argues forcefully against such delusions:

“It is a vile ambition in one’s retreat to want to extract glory from one’s idleness. We must do like the beasts and scuff out our tracks at the entrance to our lairs. You should no longer be concerned with what the world says of you but with what you say to yourself.”

I wish I could end on a happier note than this, but I’m certain that Montaigne is right. It does not matter what comes of this journey, only that I’m compelled to take it and am determined to see it through to the end. The daily satisfaction that I take from completing each essay means a great deal to me. That’s reward enough, for now.

A Rose By Any Other Name: On names

Philosopher Colin McGinn wrote a wonderful book several years ago entitled “Shakespeare’s Philosophy” that, among other things, pointed out numerous scenes in Shakespeare’s plays that were clearly influenced by Miguel de Montaigne (who Shakespeare was known to have read.) Most of the references were found in “Hamlet” or “The Tempest” (which I mentioned in a previous essay), but one play that McGinn did not cite was “Romeo and Juliet.”

I think the influence is obvious (perhaps even to the point that Montague is the Italian equivalent of Montaigne), but judge for yourself:

Tis but thy name that is my enemy; Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part

Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? that which we call a
rose

By any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee take all myself.

And here's Montaigne writing about names:

“What can stop my ostler calling himself Pompey the Great? When all is said and
done, what means or links are there which can securely attach that glorious spoken
name or pen-strokes either to my ostler, once he is dead, or to that other man whose
head was severed in Egypt, in such a way that they can profit by them? Do you think
that bothers spirits and ashes in their tombs?”

Superficial as it may seem, “Romeo and Juliet” would have no drama except for
the matter of names. In the 1962 U.S. Senate special election in Massachusetts,
Edward J. McCormack, Jr., the state Attorney General, said that if his opponent's name
were Edward Moore, not Edward Moore Kennedy, his candidacy “would be a joke.”
Crossing to the other side of the political aisle, can anyone imagine a mediocre Texas
Governor named George Walker winning the Presidency in 2000?

Montaigne delves into the question of legacy in this essay and he also pokes
quite a bit of fun at false nobility. In this day, Montaigne says that anyone who achieves
a level of success immediately attaches himself to some form of nobility:

“I know nobody in my own time who has had the good fortune to be elevated to
some extraordinarily high rank who has not been immediately endowed with new

genealogical styles of which his father knew nothing, or failed to be grafted on to some illustrious stock. Luckily it is the obscurer families which best lend themselves to such falsifications. How many mere gentlemen are there in France who are of royal stock... by their own reckoning! More I think than of any other rank.”

Montaigne could have been chief of programming for NBC if he were alive today, because that's the premise of the show “Who Do You Think You Are?” So far the show has informed us that country singer Tim McGraw isn't just the son of New York Mets reliever Tug McGraw, but he's also related to an obscure American Founding Father ... and Kim Catrell's grandfather was a bigamist.

The notorious family tree has more appeal to me, in part because my grandfather insisted that we were direct descendants of John Billington, a Mayflower passenger who was the first Englishman hanged in the New World. While my grandfather's mother was named Lida Billington, I have not been able to trace her lineage back to the notorious Billingtons (who also nearly burned the Mayflower to the ground during the voyage, due to a fireworks prank.)

As best I can tell, Lida Billington's grandparents came to the U.S., from Scotland, sometime in around 1830. I must admit, I am a bit disappointed -- being of notorious New England lineage would put me in the same class as Tyrone Slothrop in “Gravity's Rainbow,” one of the original American preterite. Pynchon endowed the preterites with mystical powers that allow them to see through the conspiracies of the elite.

Alas, we Conleys lack the ability to unravel elite conspiracies. The best I can do - - thanks to my wife's idea to leave girl's names to her and boys to me ... then giving birth

to three boys -- is to pass on ones I find interesting and memorable. So, Finnegan, Cormac and Quinn, your names have no genealogical meaning. But with some luck, your names will pass Montaigne's test:

“They say that it is a good thing to have a good name (meaning renown and reputation); but it is also a real advantage to have a fine one which is easy to pronounce and to remember, since kings and the great can then recognize us more easily and less wilfully forget us.”

Kids: The affection of fathers for their children

“One of the most moving and revealing of the chapters,” M.A. Screech called this Montaigne essay. That's an interesting description, considering that in these pages, Montaigne rails against parents who stiff their progeny of inheritance, speaks lovingly of his departed children, but only a few words about his living daughter ... and nearly nothing warm about his wife who bore them and, in the close paragraphs, seems to indicate that works of art are more important than children.

Nonetheless, there are beautiful, warm moments in this essay and if Montaigne's affection for children might seem spare by contemporary standards, his criticism of the stern fathers of his day goes a long way towards explaining why that's the case.

The essay starts in a curious place -- with Montaigne offering praise for the maternal skills of Madame d'Estissac, to whom the chapter is dedicated. Talking about her young son, who has insufficient appreciation for the hard work and dedication of his mother, Montaigne offers some timeliness, beautiful thoughts that I hereby dedicate to

my much deserving wife Jenny (who has the honor of being underappreciated by three sons:)

“But he is still a child, unable to appreciate the innumerable acts of devotion he has received from you: so I should like him, if this book should fall into his hands one day, to be able to learn something from me at a time when I shall not even have a mouth to tell it to him – something I can vouch for quite truthfully and which will be made even more vigorously evident, God willing, by the good effects he will be aware of in himself: namely, that there is no nobleman in France who owes more to his mother than he does, and that in the future he will be able to give no more certain proof of his goodness and virtue than by acknowledging your qualities.”

It's beautiful but odd, because Montaigne offers no such praise for his own wife and child. I suppose you have to chalk it up to the customs of the day -- remember, Montaigne also believed that you shouldn't enjoy sex with your wife too much, otherwise she'll become a woman who likes sex.

Montaigne also lacks respect for people who adore babies, but not older children: “I am incapable of finding a place for that emotion which leads people to cuddle newborn infants while they are still without movements of soul or recognizable features of body to make themselves lovable. And I have never willingly allowed them to be nursed in my presence. A true and well-regulated affection should be born, and then increase, as children enable us to get to know them; if they show they deserve it, we should cherish them with a truly fatherly love, since our natural propensity is then progressing

side by side with reason; if they turn out differently, the same applies, mutatis mutandis: we should, despite the force of Nature, always yield to reason.”

Before I had children myself, I somewhat understood what Montaigne was writing about, because I too liked older kids more than the babies. But having your own children and seeing them change in subtle ways day by day creates a different form of affection that is nothing like the joy of watching a “pet monkey,” as Montaigne describes that human instinct:

“We feel ourselves more moved by the skippings and jumpings and babyish tricks of our children than by their activities when they are fully formed, as though we had loved them not as human beings but only as playthings or as pet monkeys. Some fathers will give them plenty of toys when they are children but will resent the slightest expenditure on their needs once they have come of age.”

That point about giving toys but not expenditures on needs is important -- and an all-too-human trait of many fathers. But I think Montaigne is coming at the issue from the wrong direction. It's not that fathers lack affection for grown children, but rather that costs of tending for children rises considerably as they age and their appreciation for rewards like education, which they tend to see as more their birthright than a reward, is less immediate and obvious.

Next, Montaigne talks about discipline towards children. He's a softie, as am I (and my son Mac is clearly onto to me, because he says “I love you daddy” so often that it's become obvious to me that he's knows I'm a sap and all-too-easy to manipulate:)

“I condemn all violence in the education of tender minds which are being trained for honour and freedom. In rigour and constraint there is always something servile, and I hold that you will never achieve by force what you cannot achieve by reason, intelligence and skill.”

Yes, I agree with Montaigne that violence doesn't work ... but his support of reason, intelligence and skill with young boys proves that he never had to deal with three year olds. But here's how he thought he would deal with them:

“I would have been even more punctilious with boys, who are less born to serve and whose mode-of-being is freer: I would have loved to make their hearts overflow with openness and frankness. I have never seen caning achieve anything except making souls more cowardly or more maliciously stubborn.”

Yes, make their hearts overflow with openness and frankness. I need to stop the essay here and express a somewhat-off-point opinion: I never knew before having my own kids that “Malcolm in the Middle” is a documentary, not a sitcom. For years, I saw young boys through the prism of my own childhood (I highly idealized one at that:)

“curious young minds eager to learn about the world and to enjoy life to the fullest. And then I tried to survive leaving the Target toys section without buying anything and not suffering a twin tantrum. Believe me, there's something to be said for incuriosity and fearful obedience.”

My son Finn has taken recently to tell both my wife and me “I don't like you.”
Montaigne has some advice for us:

“Do we want to be loved by our children? Do we want to remove any occasion for their wishing us dead? – though no occasion for so horrible a wish could ever be right or pardonable: – then let us within reason enrich their lives with whatever we have at our disposal. To achieve that we ought not to get married so young that our adult years almost become confounded with theirs.”

Um ... sorry Montaigne ... but my wife and I did not marry young and didn't have children right away either. I'm 45 years old. So that theory goes out the window. But Montaigne has some more advice for someone in my demographic:

“A father who is brought low by age and illness, whose weakness and ill-health deprive him of ordinary human fellowship, does wrong to himself and to his family if he broods over a great pile of riches. If he is wise, he has reached the period when he really ought to want to get stripped and lie down – not stripped to his shirt but down to a nice warm dressing-gown.”

Oh, that's really a low blow ... especially considering that I took a sick day from work today and I'm wearing the 21st century equivalent of a dressing-gown, a tee-shirt and sweat pants. Oh, and what was that about a great pile of riches? Well, he explains that:

“I have seen in my lifetime and intimately known great men in authority who had clearly declined amazingly from their former capacities, which I knew of from the reputation they had acquired in their better years. For their honour's sake I would deeply have wished that they had withdrawn to their estates, dropping the load of public or military affairs which were no longer meant for their shoulders.”

So at my age I should be withdrawing from life and passing on my work to my children, aged three, three and one. Thanks Montaigne:

“I have always thought that it must be a great happiness for an old father to train his own children in the management of his affairs; he could then, during his lifetime, observe how they do it, offering advice and instruction based on his own experience in such things, and personally arranging for the ancient honour and order of his house to come into the hands of his successors, confirming in this way the hopes he could place in their future management of them.”

Clearly there’s a class distinction between Montaigne and me that cannot be bridged ... unless by “order of the house” Montaigne means my laundry, work which I’m more than happy to pass on to my children today.

At this point, Montaigne offers a warm sentiment of wanting to have his children close by as they age, which sounds to me somewhat like the Ewings on Southfork: “I would like to be near so as to watch them and to enjoy their fun and festivities as much as my age permitted. Even if I did not live among them (as I could not do without embarrassing the company by the gloominess of my age and by my being subject to illnesses – and also without being forced to restrict my own rules and habits), I would at least like to live near them in some corner of my house – not the fanciest but the most comfortable.”

Finally I come to a point in which Montaigne and I completely agree -- a father needs to have an easy, friendly relationship with his grown children:

“It is also unjust, and mad, to deprive our grown-up children of easy relations with their fathers by striving to maintain an austere and contemptuous frown, hoping by that to keep them in fear and obedience. That is a quite useless farce which makes fathers loathsome to children and, what is worse, makes them ridiculous.”

I had the opposite experience with my own father -- he was always warm and available, but I desired a little more paternal wisdom from him that he wasn't really capable of providing. I've grown to believe that this was my error and not his -- sons always seem to have unrealistic expectations of their fathers and I'm probably setting up my own mistakes without even knowing about it.

Towards the end of the essay, Montaigne diverges away from a discussion of children towards the artist's relationship with his creations. First, he says that in our art, we're actually capable of creating works that bear a much stronger resemblance to ourselves than children are:

“We can see that we also produce something else from ourselves, no less worthy of commendation: for the things we engender in our soul, the offspring of our mind, of our wisdom and talents, are the products of a part more noble than the body and are more purely our own. In this act of generation we are both mother and father; these 'children' cost us dearer and, if they are any good, bring us more honour. In the case of our other children their good qualities belong much more to them than to us: we have only a very slight share in them; but in the case of these, all their grace, worth and beauty belong to us. For this reason they have a more lively resemblance and correspondence to us.”

From this point, he makes the honest and brave statement that, for many people, art is more worthwhile than parenthood:

“When Epicurus lay dying, tormented they say by the most extreme colic paroxysms, he found consolation only in the beauty of the philosophy he had taught to the world; are we to believe that he would have found happiness in any number of well-born, well-educated children (if he had had any) to equal what he found in the abundant writing which he had brought forth? And if he had had the choice of leaving either an ill-conceived and deformed child behind him or a stupid and inept book, would – not he alone but any man of similar ability – have preferred to incur the first tragedy rather than the other? It would probably have been impious of Saint Augustine (for example) if someone had obliged him to destroy either his children (supposing he had had any) or else his writings (from which our religion receives such abundant profit) and he had not preferred to destroy his children.”

That’s a stunning statement, but I think he gets Saint Augustine right -- he would have preferred that his writings live and many of the moralists through history would make a similar call. Rather than condemn Montaigne for this thought, I think it’s more valuable to let the thought linger. He closes by comparing the value of a birth child with the essays he is writing:

“I am not at all sure whether I would not much rather have given birth to one perfectly formed son by commerce with the Muses than by commerce with my wife. As for this present child of my brain, what I give it I give unconditionally and irrevocably, just as one does to the children of one’s body; such little good as I have already done it is no

longer mine to dispose of; it may know plenty of things which I know no longer, and remember things about me that I have forgotten; if the need arose to turn to it for help, it would be like borrowing from a stranger. It is richer than I am, yet I am wiser than it.” So, returning to Screech’s view, I don’t find this essay to be particularly moving. It is revealing, without a doubt. Revealing that Montaigne’s view of children is somewhat naive and his appreciation of his own wife is minimal at best. Most revealing of all is Montaigne’s view of art. There’s nothing moving about his conclusion, but I appreciate his honesty.

Security: That difficulty increases desire

This week in The New York Review of Books, the debate continues about whether Montaigne preferred to have sex standing up. I can understand that in his day, Montaigne’s writings must have been rather scandalous and that probably accounted for a lot of his early popularity.

But in this post-Hefner age, where everyone blathers on about their sex lives in public endlessly, why should we care what a 16th century man had to say about it? I’ve already noted from previous essays Montaigne’s stark opinions about marriage ... and this essay seems to equate marriage with a form of imprisonment:

“We thought we were tying our marriage-knots more tightly by removing all means of undoing them; but the tighter we pulled the knot of constraint the looser and slacker became the knot of our will and affection.

“By nature there is nothing so contrary to our tastes than that satiety which comes from ease of access; and nothing which sharpens them more than rareness and difficulty: In all things pleasure is increased by the very danger which ought to make us flee from them.

“Our appetite scorns and passes over what it holds in its hand, so as to run after what it does not have: He leaps over what lies fixed in his path, to chase after whatever runs away. To forbid us something is to make us want it.”

Is Montaigne talking about human nature or just about himself? I'll leave that to you.

What I find more interesting is that Montaigne makes a radical turn in this essay away from a question of sexual allure and towards the question of security. His point is that whenever we endeavor to make ourselves safer from harm, we actually end up making ourselves less safe.

The most interesting aspect of this turn is that most of the material about security was added decades after the original essay, toward the end of Montaigne's life. On one hand, I imagine that Montaigne was bored by this time with the sexual intrigues of his younger days and found the higher questions of liberty and justice more worthwhile. His closing paragraph is touched with Proustian wistfulness:

“In the midst of so many fortified houses, I alone of my rank in the whole of France as far as I know have entrusted mine entirely to the protection of Heaven. I have never removed from it either silver spoon or title-deed. I will never fear for myself, nor save myself, by halves. If God's favor is acquired by a complete confidence in it, it will

endure unto the end for me; if not I have myself already endured long enough to render that length of time remarkable and worth recording. What! It has been thirty years or more!”

But there’s a dark side to Montaigne’s late additions too. The early version of the essays ended with a discussion of vice and how punishments may serve to sharpen vices rather than blunt them. The implication is that marriage vows are a form of punishment and that they are an ineffective means of enforcing fidelity.

The abrupt turn of the revised essay to a discussion of homestead security deepens the imprisonment analogy. What Montaigne is basically saying in the new material is that he will not turn his own home into an armed fortress just to make himself feel safer. It will not actually work to make him safer, it will only heighten the desire of would-be attackers.

Many scholars believe that Montaigne found peace in his marriage later in life and softened many of his beliefs. This essay would suggest otherwise -- that not only did he continue to believe it to be a form of punishment, he grew to think of it as imprisonment.

Sexuality: On some lines of Virgil

One of the great failings of philosophy is the fact that no major philosopher before Michel Foucault bothered to think and write extensively about sex – and what Foucault had to say wasn’t all that insightful. Human sexuality has been passed off to theologians, poets, psychologists and everyone looking to sell just about anything.

Immanuel Kant is rumored to have died a virgin and even if not the case, his philosophy sure reads that way. Nietzsche once called Socrates a “great erotic,” yet what we know of his sexual nature comes via Plato – author of some of the most bizarre and repugnant ideas about sex in human history. At least the way I read Plato, he would have been quite pleased with the government in “Gatacca.”

So we’re left with various religious prohibitions on sex and the romantic views of poets. I will agree with Plato on one score – the poets lie too much. We cannot trust their views of sex because of their cloying nature and their deep-seated agon with religion and science. Sex is the Romantic’s religion and so we must always view a poet’s view of it with as much skepticism as we would a political candidate’s opinion on a policy issue.

Sigmund Freud opened the door to a more open public discussion of sex – and modernist artists like D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Marcel Proust made important contributions. But one of Foucault’s genuine insights in his history of sexuality is his claim that sex has never been repressed and there’s no liberation to be found in greater sexual expression. If anything, human beings need some freedom from sex and the oppressive Romantic belief that it holds the key to our salvation and happiness.

The “culture wars” of the 1990s, still ongoing in some respects, revolved around a science vs. religion approach to sex. But making sex either clinical or sinful doesn’t really get to the heart of the matter. The most serious attempts to talk about contemporary sexual ethics and mores are in the popular culture – TV sitcoms like Seinfeld and on talk radio, especially the Howard Stern show.

Discussions of sex demand a sense of irony and embarrassing self-confession. After all, the act of sex leaves you at your most vulnerable – naked, on display and open to critique. If you refuse to open yourself up to mockery and cannot speak the raw language of the act, you really don't have anything useful to add to public sexual discourse.

As mentioned in one of my previous essays, Montaigne bears a great resemblance to Howard Stern when he writes about sex, which is one of the reasons why he's one of the most important thinkers in history on the subject. I would go as far to say that this essay is the single most thoughtful, bawdy, ironic and wistful writing on the topic, making it one the greatest of all Montaigne essays.

It's nearly impossible for me to fully capture the depth of Montaigne's thoughts and feelings on the subject. I typically underline key passages in Montaigne's essays and use these quotes to recount the key thoughts. In this case, I ended up with 17 pages of notes. To properly treat this Montaigne essay would require a book-length analysis – and I certainly hope that one of the hundreds of philosophy PhD's in America at the moment is using this essay as the basis of a dissertation.

Montaigne knew that this essay was something different and special – it's controversy was by design:

“It pains me that my Essays merely serve ladies as a routine piece of furniture – something to put into their salon. This chapter will get me into their private drawing-rooms; and I prefer my dealings with women to be somewhat private: the public ones lack intimacy and savor.”

And he wonders why people have such trouble talking about sex frankly:

“The genital activities of mankind are so natural, so necessary and so right: what have they done to make us never dare to mention them without embarrassment and to exclude them from serious orderly conversation? We are not afraid to utter the words kill, thief or betray; but those others we only dare to mutter through our teeth. Does that mean that the less we breathe a word about sex the more right we have to allow it to fill our thoughts?”

Montaigne sums up his philosophy of sex very succinctly:

“Reflecting as I often do on the ridiculous excoriations of that pleasure, the absurd, mindless, stupefying emotions with which it disturbs a Zeno or a Cratippus, that indiscriminate raging, that face inflamed with frenzy and cruelty at the sweetest point of love, that grave, severe, ecstatic face in so mad an activity, the fact that our delights and our waste-matters are lodged higgledy-piggledy together; and that its highest pleasure has something of the groanings and distraction of pain, I believe that what Plato says is true: Man is the plaything of the gods -- what a ferocious way of jesting! – and that it was in mockery that Nature bequeathed us this, the most disturbing of activities, the one most common to all creatures, so as to make us all equal, bringing the mad and the wise, men and beasts, to the same level.”

In fact, Montaigne believes that sex is evidence of human beings' core stupidity ... but in a good way:

“But that other activity makes every other thought crawl defeated under the yoke; by its imperious authority it makes a brute of all the theology of Plato and a beast of all

his philosophy. Everywhere else you can preserve some decency; all other activities accept the rules of propriety: this other one can only be thought of as flawed or ridiculous. Just try and find a wise and discreet way of doing it! Alexander said that he acknowledged he was a mortal because of sleep and this activity: sleep stifles and suppresses the faculties of our souls; the 'job' similarly devours and disperses them. It is indeed a sign of our original Fall, but also of our inanity and ugliness. On the one hand Nature incites us to it, having attached to this desire the most noble, useful and agreeable of her labors: on the other hand she lets us condemn it as immoderate and flee it as indecorous, lets us blush at it and recommend abstaining from it."

Like Howard Stern, Montaigne openly discusses his small penis and the problems it has created in his sexual life:

"When I have found a woman discontented with me I have not immediately gone and railed at her fickleness: I have asked myself, rather, whether I would be right to rail against Nature. Should my cock be not long enough nor good and thick, then Nature has indeed treated me unlawfully and unjustly – Even good matrons know all too well and do not gladly see a tiny cock – and inflicted the most enormous injury."

And this is another reason why there's never been a truly groundbreaking and useful philosophy of sex – men too heavily dominate the field. Give Montaigne credit, though, for raising some uncomfortable questions about men that it might normally take a female philosopher to raise. Such as ... have you ever noticed that all male clothing through history makes a special effort to hide or distort the size of the penis? Shouldn't some truth in advertising be required?

“Why do we parade our genitals even now behind our loose-breeches, and, what is worse, cheat and deceive by exaggerating their natural size? I would like to believe that such styles of clothing were invented in better and more moral times so that people should in fact not be deceived, each man gallantly rendering in public an account of his endowments; the more primitive peoples do still display it somewhere near its real size. In those days they supplied details of man’s working member just as we give the measurements of our arm or foot.”

Montaigne suggests that all men would be better served by getting the issue of their penis size out of the way as quickly as possible:

“It is perhaps a more chaste and fruitful practice to bring women to learn early what the living reality is rather than to allow them to make conjectures according to the licence of a heated imagination: instead of our organs as they are their hopes and desires lead them to substitute extravagant ones three times as big. And one man I know lost out by exposing his somewhere while they were still unready to perform their most serious task We bait and lure women by every means. We are constantly stimulating and overheating their imagination. And then we gripe about it.”

Anticipating the wrath of the FCC which has dogged Stern throughout his career, Montaigne notes that he speaks frankly about sex because there’s no other way to talk about it:

“I like modesty. It is not my judgment that makes me choose this shocking sort of talk: Nature chose it for me. I am no more praising it than I am praising any behavior

contrary to the accepted norms; but I am defending it, lessening the indictment by citing individual and general considerations.”

Along the same lines, Montaigne notes that you really shouldn't worry about people gossiping about you – because if what they are saying is untrue, they aren't actually discussing the real you:

“When somebody told Socrates that people were gossiping about him he said, ‘Not at all. There is nothing of me in what they are saying.’ In my case, if a man were to praise me for being a good navigator, for being very proper or very chaste I would not owe him a thank you. Similarly, if anyone should call me a traitor, a thief or a drunkard I would not think that it was me he attacked. Men who misjudge what they are like may well feed on false approval: I cannot. I see myself and explore myself right into my inwards; I know what pertains to me. I am content with less praise provided that I am more known. People might think that I am wise with the kind of wisdom which I hold to be daft.”

Montaigne was well ahead of his time in criticizing sexual mores for protecting the interests of men. Here he notes that women have a point in rejecting the mores entirely:

“Women are not entirely wrong when they reject the moral rules proclaimed in society, since it is we men alone who have made them. There is by nature always some quarrelling and brawling between women and men: the closest union between us remains turbulent and tempestuous. In the opinion of our poet we treat women without due consideration. That is seen by what follows.”

From here, he analyzes how foolish it is to expect chastity from women and not men. To begin, he notes that women simply have a greater capacity for sex, so it's nonsensical to expect them to have less of a sex drive:

“Women have an incomparably greater capacity for the act of love than we do and desire it more ardently – and we know that this fact was attested in Antiquity by that priest who had been first a man and then a woman: He knew Venus from both angles We go and assign sexual restraint to women as something peculiarly theirs, under pain of punishments of the utmost severity. No passion is more urgent than this one, yet our will is that they alone should resist it – not simply as a vice with its true dimensions but as an abomination and a curse, worse than impiety and parricide. Meanwhile we men can give way to it without blame or reproach Yet we men on the other hand want our wives to be in good health, energetic, radiant, buxom... and chaste at the same time, both hot and cold at once.”

Culture trains girls at a young age to be sexually desirable ... and the very nature of female relationships makes them far better attuned to romantic interest than men:

“We train women from childhood for the practices of love: their graces, their clothes, their education, their way of speaking regard only that one end. Those in charge of them impress nothing on them but the face of love, if only to put them off it by continually portraying it to them. My daughter – I have no other There is no word, no exemplary tale and no stratagem which women do not know better than our books do. The doctrines which nature, youth and good health (those excellent schoolmasters) ceaselessly inspire in their souls are born in their veins.”

I could go on like this for dozens of pages. But I'll wrap this up by pointing out just two more of Montaigne's insights about sex. First is his thoughts on what matters most for a man in gaining the attention of women:

"If anyone were to ask me what is the first quality needed in love I would reply: knowing how to seize an opportunity. It is the second and the third as well. It is the factor that can achieve anything. I have often lacked good fortune but also occasionally lacked initiative. God help those who can mock me for it! In our days you need to be more inconsiderate – which our young men justify under the pretense of ardor; but if women looked into it closely they would find that it arises rather from lack of respect. I myself devoutly feared to give offense and am always inclined to respect whomever I love."

Montaigne made that comment rather wistfully ... bear in mind that this essay is one of the last pieces he ever composed. His sexual life had almost entirely passed him by at this point, giving the entire essay a vibe similar to Proust's "Time Regained." His final section relates to a sexual life seen in retrospect. First, he restates his belief that sex, for all of its absurdity, is a healthy, important activity:

"It is a vain pastime, it is true, indecorous, shaming and wrong; but I reckon that, treated in this fashion, it is health-bringing and appropriate for loosening up a sluggish mind and body; as a doctor I would order it for a man of my mould and disposition as readily as any other prescription so as to liven him up and keep him in trim until he is well on in years and to postpone the onset of old age."

Finally, Montaigne turns to the issue of sex and growing old. It's a sad close to a fairly joyous chapter – but it shows great wisdom as well. As noted two essays ago, Montaigne believes it is very important for people who have grown beyond their sexual prime to keep a young mind and not become hypocritically intolerant in their old age. This passage needs to be read with that thought in mind:

“I am well aware that love is a good thing very hard to recover. Our tastes have, through weakness, become more delicate and, through experience, more discriminating. We demand more when we have less to offer: we want the maximum of choice just when we least deserve to find favor. Realizing we are thus, we are less bold and more suspicious; knowing our own circumstances – and theirs – nothing can assure us we are loved.”

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