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Modeling the Environment

When you graduate High School you listen to countless cliché speeches on how an important chapter of your life has just drawn a close. Guest speakers as well as the class valedictorian go on to add that you are ready to set your sights on new goals and seize new opportunities. These speeches are followed by reoccurring conversations with family, friends, peers, and strangers who claim they remember when you were just a young child, asking where you will be attending college and what you are interested in studying. Even though you have a rehearsed answer, you leave the conversation overcome with nerves, challenging yourself with more difficult questions. What do I want to do with my life? Who do I want to become? Essentially, you begin asking yourself “How to live?” Administrators and advisors are aware of the heighted stress of this transitional period and in response try to make the move as easy as possible. The administration’s choice to assign Sarah Bakewell’s *How to Live* was extremely successful as it presented me with a lot of helpful information in making up my mind about the questions I have been struggling to answer. Even though Montaigne himself was uncertain about how he should live his life, his thoughts and personal experiences were invaluable in helping guide me on a path towards discovering my life’s direction. I understand the first person may not be acceptable for a colligate paper; in an opinion essay such as this however, I believe the first person will suffice.

 Over the course of the summer, in preparation for college, there was a lot I had to take in and make up my mind about. Difficult decisions were constantly being made whether I was picking out bedding and decorations for my dorm or selecting what classes I am interested in taking. As a “soon to be freshman” I always had something to consider. *How to Live* was my escape from the summer’s stress. Professor Gago-Jover said it best when he wrote that Montaigne’s “own judgment and personal experience makes him more accessible to modern readers than any other author of the Renaissance.” I truly felt a connection to Montaigne as he was seeking an answer to the same question as I. What is really special about this book however is that Bakewell and Montaigne are not forcing you to arrive at an answer to this question of how to live, rather, they want you to continue questioning while exploring a number of possibilities. The emails I received from Professor Gago-Jover sparked an interest for me to read the book but I do not believe I was completely stimulated to learn more about Montaigne until I actually began the reading. Once I began reading I felt I got to know Montaigne personally through his unique approach at communicating his thoughts and feelings in his writing. Bakewell’s paralleled input and opinions about Montaigne and his twenty answers to the question were very interesting and valuable as they typically drove me into deeper thought and often times provided a different interpretation of Montaigne’s thoughts than what I had initially derived. I am extremely pleased with Professor Gago-Jover’s choice for this book as our summer reading assignment since Montaigne and Sarah Bakewell’s attempts at answering how to live provided me with an altered outlook on life as well as a direction for how I want to live.

As I began my journey of self-discovery at College of the Holy Cross I recalled Montaigne’s advise and concentrated on “question[ing] everything.” I found this attempt at an answer to be the most personally compelling and therefore believe that by applying Montaigne’s wisdom and insight on this idea during my time at Holy Cross, I will find my place in the world and reach an answer to the question “How to Live.” Holy Cross believes that “critical examination of fundamental religious and philosophical questions is integral to liberal arts education.” As I seek to discover myself while pursuing a liberal arts education, I will continue to question everything just as Montaigne suggested. In questioning everything I do not understand, or am interested in learning more about, I already feel that I have broadened my knowledge, and have gained deeper understanding on new and current topics. Since Holy Cross’ liberal arts curriculum allows its students to explore different fields of study, I am currently enrolled in a music class. Since I have no prior knowledge of music I have been asking many questions and have already found myself turning to Montaigne’s wise words; “At first, these utterances cause nothing but perplexity. Later, they open a path to all encompassing wisdom” (Bakewell, 124). At first I was frustrated with my music class. I came into the class late and was struggling to catch up learning topics that I had not previously been exposed to. With Montaigne’s wise words now in the back of my mind, I felt comfortable questioning everything I did not understand. I am now caught up with the rest of the class and actually enjoy what I am learning. Had I not been assigned this book over the summer, I am certain I would have been too timid to ask all of the questions I did.

I was extremely pleased that our first assignment was reading another piece on Montaigne. Having enjoyed our summer reading book so much, I was already craving more. Reading “On Cannibals” allowed me to look at Montaigne’s works in a new light. “On Cannibals” questioned the actions and beliefs of others as opposed to raising opinions on self-question. Montaigne once again looked at and questioned every possibility, which is admirable since too often people jump quickly to a conclusion. It was a refreshing treat to struggle to arrive at an answer or strong opinion with Montaigne in this piece since in *How to Live* you didn’t ever have to make up your mind. Though this topic was more difficult for me to relate to, his unique style was in the forefront of this challenging topic making every line pleasing to read. This topic was not something I was as interested in however, I loved that a moral question that still existed. I was once again able to connect with Montaigne in this piece since Montaigne was trying to make up his mind while you journeyed with him attempting to make up yours as well.

Professor Gago-Jover also wrote in regards to *How to Live* “If there is a central message, it is about individuals trying to find their way through life. Reading both of these works has provided me with new found insight on how I should approach my life’s journey. I am grateful to be apart of College of the Holy Cross and will apply everything that I have learned from Montaigne and Sarah Bakewell in my studies here. *How to Live* accomplished everything that I believe the administration was hoping to in a summer reading assignment. I could not have been more pleased with everything I was able to take from it.