Linnea Brandt

Professor Little

Modeling the Environment

14 September 2012

Montaigne Reflection

The transition from high school to college is notorious for being one of life’s most difficult transitions. However, it is possible to ease that transition with various activities, people, and books. There are numerous books that could qualify as “good” summer reading books for incoming freshmen, but which book would be one that would apply to the lives of soon to be students at College of the Holy Cross? I feel as though our class Dean made a great decision by choosing *How to Live: or A Life of Montaigne* by Sarah Bakewell as our summer reading. This book supplements why we should seek a Liberal Arts and a Jesuit Education. In our Montserrat seminar, we tried to supplement what we read over the summer by reading Montaigne’s *Of Cannibals*. However, I felt that the book alone could have done just as well pointing us towards a great future here at Holy Cross.

Ideally, a liberal arts education prepares a person to think critically and be able to adapt well to change. Throughout *How to Live*, Bakewell stresses Montaigne’s idea that with an open mind we can learn so much. This, alongside other influences, prepared me to come to Holy Cross with high expectations for opportunities to not only get involved, but also to take time to reflect on the new information I acquire. But Holy Cross is not only a liberal arts college; it is also a Jesuit institution, which values many other expectations. Montaigne inadvertently approved of Jesuit perspectives on education. One of the main goals of the Jesuit community is developing and improving upon the person as a whole. Bakewell’s book and Montaigne’s philosophy support this objective by giving advice on how to succeed in numerous areas of our intellectual lives. Montaigne encourages us to learn from others by conversing with ancient authors, because there should be no such thing as a “time-gap.” Treating authors like they are our friends is the key to reading across centuries. To do so, we must learn a lot about our world, first. Another one of the Jesuit perspectives includes how we should be answering our call to human excellence. To display that excellence here at Holy Cross, we supply our lives with rigorous academics, and use our God-given gifts and talents to improve our community.

Lastly, a Jesuit tradition is to demonstrate the dignity and value of each person. I feel Montaigne stresses the value of each person when he consistently encourages his readers to find learning opportunities in the everyday life. He advocates readers to journal their thoughts and experiences, arguing that each person’s thoughts ought to be prized. From what Bakewell presented to us about Montaigne’s ideas, I think he would be a supporter of both a liberal arts and Jesuit education. His themes over the course of twenty answers to the question how to live one’s life include searching for the purpose of the life we live, accepting imperfections, promoting individuality, and many other themes. This book effectively made me eager about the monumental change that was about to occur in my life. I will admit, however, when I first discovered what our summer reading book was, I was almost dreading reading about some sixteenth century philosopher whom I knew nothing about. But once I got into it, I realized the information and philosophy provided in Bakewell’s book was especially applicable to a girl like me, whose life was inevitably about to change.

The chapter in the book that captivated me the most was the one where Montaigne answers the question how to live with “Pay Attention.” In a nutshell, this chapter conveys his belief that it is important to live in the present moment: live without regrets, and don’t stress about the future. By doing so, we will not miss out on the wonderful fascinations of everyday life. This philosophy of life has been challenging for me to apply here at Holy Cross. I often waste time getting anxious or worried about the future, or pondering what could have been if the past had gone differently. Montaigne recommends living with a sort of “naïve amazement at each instant of experience” (Bakewell 37). I like this idea because it would force me to constantly remind myself of the incredible opportunity I have to learn what is right at my fingertips. I have always had a desire to learn, and I have also discovered that the world is a bewildering place that deserves to be explored.

Montaigne advises that we pay attention by journaling our experiences in order to reflect on the complexities of life and trying to decipher why we are here. In order to try this, I have chosen to fully submerge myself in class discussions. I made a promise to myself to fully dive into my readings, and whenever I learn something new that amazes me, I will write it down in my notebook. This notebook will contain a lot of my personal thoughts but also incredible facts about the world that may be uncommon to most humans. I hope to keep this book so that the world will never cease to amaze me, or maybe perhaps someday I will be able to share it with others.

After reading *Of Cannibals*, by Michel de Montaigne, I did not really feel a deeper understanding of who Montaigne was, or what his philosophy was all about. My schema of who he is did not change after reading *Of Cannibals*. It brought up an area of his philosophy that I was not really captivated by in Bakewell’s book, when it was mentioned in passing. I almost feel that the perspective Montaigne offered is one that I consider myself to already be practicing—or so I hope. I have travelled to multiple nations around the world, something that is unique for someone of my young age. I absolutely love learning about other people’s societal practices and cultures. Montaigne advocates how we cannot judge other cultures merely because their culture is irrational, since we are blind to our own faults. More than anything, *Of Cannibals* led me to ponder if there are things in my own society that are deemed to be acceptable, but perhaps should be questioned on the basis of their morality or ethical standards.

I hope the education I receive here at Holy Cross will provide me a new vision, to open my eyes to some of our societal and global issues. I plan to seek after the wisdom that Montaigne inspires me to attain in order to come up with some alternative solutions to the issues we face as a civilization. Montaigne and Holy Cross have successfully come together over the past few months of my life by inspiring me to want to learn more about the world I live in and discover how to actively pursue my role in it.

Works Cited

Bakewell, Sarah. “*How to Live, or A Life of Montaigne”* London: Random House UK,

2010. Print.