Montaigne and the First Year Summer Reading

Michel de Montaigne was a brilliant writer during his lifetime and still proves to be brilliant today. This is because the morals he expresses to his readers reach an extensive audience in the past and present and will most likely apply to future generations. I have confidence saying the summer reading book, *How to Live or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* by Sarah Bakewell, was both an appropriate and successful summer reading assignment because of the moral lessons presented within the text by Bakewell through Montaigne. It is evident that Montaigne’s style of writing has a touch of timelessness in it and that is what makes his words carry their weight and apply to people today. In *How to Live*, a particular section stood out to me – chapter 10 which is titled *Q. How to live? A. Wake from the sleep of habit*. I found it to be personally compelling as well as meaningful because it became clearer to me that the way we view the world and the societies within it coincides with our overall attitude, mentality, and well-being. Continuing this idea, for instance, an individual like Hitler had such a negative and rigid outlook on life that he shut out and oppressed those who he believed to be inferior. Hitler can fall under so many labels but open-minded definitely was not one of them. Had he looked at Jewish people in a different light – a fair one at that – perhaps his own life would have taken a different path and would not have ultimately ended up with suicide. Moreover, I am certain that Montaigne’s separate essay, “On Cannibals” helped improve my understanding of Montaigne and his very unique style of writing because it specifically took into account the importance of viewing a society, for instance, from a completely different angle and the benefits of being able to do so. As far as I am into the academic year at Holy Cross, I have indeed made several choices centered on these answers that Bakewell writes of. Since day one on Mt. Saint James, I have recognized that I am among a group of people so diverse yet so similar in terms of brilliance and motivation.

As previously touched upon, Montaigne has a writing style that is so distinct from his contemporaries and ours alike. Although it might be objected that Montaigne’s writing be classified as haphazardly organized, his work is actually a series of carefully structured thoughts. The organization and presentation of his ideas is much like the formats we read about in *They Say, I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. Montaigne presents his thoughts by first rendering the opposing party’s ideas and then his own, as if to rebuttal politely and without bias. Montaigne writes like this in “On Cannibals.”

In Chapter 10 of *How to Live,* Bakewell covers one answer on how to live according to Montaigne; wake up from the sleep of habit. This lesson can apply to anyone, anywhere, at any time. This passage in particular is written proof that his lessons are so rudimentary that they can be applied to the base of any goal. It has been stated and restated by many that Montaigne was incredibly ahead of his time. Not to mention that he would appear to be a contemporary writer of our time on paper. With that said, Montaigne was able to see the value of perspective in a given situation even back in his time, as well as apply all that he knew to future generations and still have it be relatable. He was a firm believer in seeing “the big picture” and dealing with situations from odd and even impractical angles. Montaigne believed in something greater than black and white, and the goal of many of his writings was to explore and explain the gray area. He believed that every man was capable of gaining boundless wisdom and insight by “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes.”

“Habit makes everything look bland;” writes Bakewell, “it is sleep-inducing. Jumping to a different perspective is a way of waking oneself up again” (Bakewell, p. 182). She goes on to explain that Montaigne himself often utilized this trick in his writing. Montaigne did not make this part of his writing style simply because he enjoyed it himself; he wanted his readers and perhaps disbelievers to have some kind of ‘light dawns on marble head’ epiphany. Montaigne wanted them to look at life through a different lens and, in turn, learn something entirely new. With this, they ultimately gain insight and depth into the world of understanding. Another common concept touched upon by Bakewell through Montaigne is the idea of standards. Montaigne wrote about outlandish customs, traditions, and practices from all around the world to send shock waves through his readers and expose them to something entirely different from what they were accustomed to. Bakewell writes, “If you live in a country where teeth are blackened, it seems obvious that ebony ivories are the only beautiful ones” (Bakewell, p. 183). Montaigne wanted to test his readers’ standards and replace them not with new standards – but rather no boundaries at all. Montaigne knew how vibrant and diverse everything on Earth was and would be for centuries to come. If anything, his work could be dubbed as the foundation of a survival guide. With the ability to set our mind free we can also benefit in the fact that “[o]ur eyes are opened to the truth that our customs are no less weird than anyone else’s” (Bakewell, p. 183).

Out of the twenty answers Bakewell can fit between 328 pages, Perhaps the greatest and most all-encompassing lesson Montaigne had for us is that all of his lessons – simple yet deep – serve as the foundation for humanity itself therefore making Montaigne’s work timeless.

As I began reading “On Cannibals,” I found myself lost in a string of statements that I could not seem to connect with one another. It took me until our class discussion to realize Montaigne’s purpose in writing the way that he did. His use of the ‘They Say, I Say’ is different stylistically from many authors of his time, but it conveys his standpoint very effectively. Montaigne’s source for this essay is interesting as well. “That man of mine was a simple, rough fellow” writes Montaigne. “[He had] qualities which make for a good witness … you need either a very trustworthy man or else a man so simple that he has nothing in him on which to build such false discoveries or make them plausible; and he must be wedded to no cause. Such was my man” (Montaigne, p. 231).

On an entirely different note, I have made choices here at Holy Cross that have reflected some of Montaigne’s answers on how to live. In accordance with chapter 10, I have woken myself up again by jumping to a different perspective; a perspective of learning that is. I was urged to enroll in a Montserrat course that fell out of my comfort zone, and Modeling the Environment certainly does that. The other four choices I put down also fell under the natural or mathematical science category. Modeling the Environment stretches outside of my comfort zone because I do not feel confident in my mathematical or scientific skills, but more so mathematics. I also decided to take an art class that was different than what I had been doing from kindergarten up through my senior year of high school. Instead of Drawing and Painting, I decided to take a sculpture class. As much as I love art, this new form of art will prove to be a challenge. Lastly, I chose to take American Sign Language. This language is completely new to me and it has no similarities to Spanish which I have studied for the past seven years. Overall, my first semester schedule is challenging in the sense that almost all of the material is completely unfamiliar to me, but I am prepared to take on the challenge and breathe new life into my own academic experience here at Holy Cross.

There are many different ways the question of “how to live” can be broken down. Bakewell and Montaigne have done a pretty good job of answering it in twenty different ways. However, the fact of life is that only you can make your own life worth living; it always starts with you. There is an actual significance, I believe, in addressing how one should live in the first place. Getting to this point shows compassion for the journey of life and the desire to make something out of it. Most people say they want to make their life worthwhile and leave a legacy perhaps, money maybe. But individuals such as Montaigne go above and beyond that objective as they try to ascertain the meaning of life and how to live it.