

Would most of your problems be solved if you just could sit quietly by yourself pondering death?

Read and consider the first two statements about Miguel de Montaigne (1553-1592), and then a brief survey of some of his shorter wisdom.

Statement 1:

Montaigne is considered the creator of the essay, a form that melds the intellectual and the personal, and his musings have inspired countless writers, including William Hazlitt, Friedrich Nietzsche and Virginia Woolf. Ms. Bakewell would add every blogger, tweeter, Facebooker and YouTuber to that list.

This idea — writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognize their own humanity — has not existed forever,” Ms. Bakewell writes. “It had to be invented. And, unlike many cultural inventions, it can be traced to a single person.” Montaigne wrote about whatever crossed his mind: animals, sex, magic, diplomacy, violence, hermaphroditism, self-doubt. “Essayer” means “to try” in French, or as Ms. Bakewell adds, “to test, or to taste it, or give it a whirl.”

--from Patricia Cohen’s “Conversation Across Centuries with the Father of All Bloggers”

Statement 2:

In 1571, he retired from public life to the Tower of the Château, his so-called "citadel", in the Dordogne, where he almost totally isolated himself from every social and family affair. Locked up in his library, which contained a collection of some 1,500 works, he began work on his *Essais* ("Essays"), first published in 1580.

A Sample of the Short Wisdom of Montaigne

A man who fears suffering is already suffering from what he fears.

Kings and philosophers defecate, and so do ladies.

The soul which has no fixed purpose in life is lost; to be everywhere, is to be nowhere.

No matter that we may mount on stilts, we still must walk on our own legs. And on the highest throne in the world, we still sit only on our own bottom.

There is no conversation more boring than the one where everybody agrees.

My life has been full of terrible misfortunes most of which never happened.

Not being able to govern events, I govern myself.

Of all our infirmities, the most savage is to despise our being.

One may be humble out of pride.

The most certain sign of wisdom is cheerfulness.

If there is such a thing as a good marriage, it is because it resembles friendship rather than love.

If you don't know how to die, don't worry. Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don't bother your head about it.

I have never seen a greater monster or miracle in the world than myself.

I know well what I am fleeing from but not what I am in search of.

If ordinary people complain that I speak too much of myself, I complain that they do not even think of themselves.

I prefer the company of peasants because they have not been educated sufficiently to reason incorrectly.

A good marriage would be between a blind wife and a deaf husband.

Marriage happens as with cages: the birds without despair to get in, and those within despair of getting out.

Short Discussion: How do the following two quotations from Montaigne pertain to the ideas created in great tragedies? Please cite one specific Shakespearian soliloquy that exemplifies the ideals on facing death created by Montaigne.

Let us learn bravely to stand our ground, and fight him. And to begin to deprive him of the greatest advantage he has over us, let us take a way quite contrary to the common course. Let us disarm him of his novelty and strangeness, let us converse and be familiar with him, and have nothing so frequent in our thoughts as death. Upon all occasions represent him to our imagination in his every shape; at the stumbling of a horse, at the falling of a tile, at the least prick with a pin, let us presently consider, and say to ourselves, 'Well, and what if it had been death itself?' and, thereupon, let us encourage and fortify ourselves. Let us evermore, amidst our jollity and feasting, set the remembrance of our frail condition before our eyes, never suffering ourselves to be so far transported with our delights, but that we have some intervals of reflecting upon, and considering how many several ways this jollity of ours tends to death, and with how many dangers it threatens it. The Egyptians were wont to do after this manner, who in the height of their feasting and mirth, caused a dried skeleton of a man to be brought into the room to serve for a memento to their guests... Where death waits for us is uncertain; let us look for him everywhere. The premeditation of death is the premeditation of liberty; he who has learned to die has unlearned to serve. There is nothing evil in life for him who rightly comprehends that the privation of life is no evil: to know, how to die delivers us from all subjection and constraint.

The most profound joy has more of gravity than of gaiety in it.

Modern Application to Luella Students: Now that you have explored Montaigne consider the following wisdom on the art of solitude the art of reflection. Take 15 minutes and seek out solitude and quiet—alone. Who knows, your papers be better and you might be able to read more.

"It is a small soul, buried beneath the weight of affairs, that does not know how to get clean away from them, that cannot put them aside and pick them up again."

"When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep; yes, and when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts drift to far-off matters for some part of the time for some other part I lead them back again to the walk, the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, to myself."

