WISDOM TAKES WORK

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LEARN. APPLY. REPEAT.

RYAN HOLIDAY

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Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when they are young nor weary in the search when they have grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not yet come, or that it is past and gone, is like saying that the season for happiness is not yet or that it is now no more.

—EPICURUS

The Four Virtues

It was long ago now that Hercules came to the crossroads.

At a quiet intersection in the hills of Greece, in the shade of knobby pine trees, the great hero of Greek myth first met his destiny.

Where exactly it was or when, no one knows. We hear of this moment in the stories of Socrates. We can see it captured in the most beautiful art of the Renaissance. We can feel his budding energy, his strapping muscles, and his anguish in the classic Bach cantata. If John Adams had had his way, Hercules at the crossroads would have been immortalized on the official seal of the newly founded United States.

Because there, before his undying fame, before the twelve labors, before he changed the world, Hercules faced a crisis, one as life-changing and real as any of us have ever faced.

Where was he headed? Where was he trying to go? That's the point of the story. Alone, unknown, unsure, Hercules, like so many, did not know.

Where the road diverged lay a beautiful goddess who offered

him every temptation he could imagine. Adorned in finery, she promised him a life of ease. She swore he'd never taste want or unhappiness or fear or pain. Follow her, she said, and every desire would be fulfilled.

On the other path stood a sterner goddess in a pure white robe. She made a quieter call. She promised no rewards except those that came as a result of hard work. It would be a long journey, she said. There would be sacrifice. There would be scary moments. But it was a journey fit for a god, the way of his ancestors. It would make him the man he was meant to be.

Was this real? Did it really happen?

If it's only a legend, does it matter?

Yes, because this is a story about us.

About our dilemma. About our own crossroads.

For Hercules the choice was between vice and virtue, the easy way and the hard way, the well-trod path and the road less traveled. The same goes for us.

Hesitating only for a second, Hercules chose the one that made all the difference.

He chose virtue.

"Virtue" can seem old-fashioned. In fact, virtue—*arete*—translates to something very simple and very timeless: Excellence. Moral. Physical. Mental.

In the ancient world, virtue was comprised of four key components.

Courage.

Temperance.

Justice.

Wisdom.

The "touchstones of goodness," the philosopher king Marcus Aurelius called them. To millions, they're known as the "cardinal virtues," four near-universal ideals adopted by Christianity and most of Western philosophy, but equally valued in Buddhism, Hinduism, and just about every other philosophy you can imagine. They're called "cardinal," C. S. Lewis pointed out, not because they come down from church authorities, but because they originate from the Latin *cardo,* or hinge.

It's *pivotal* stuff. It's the stuff that the door to the good life hangs on.

They are also our topic for this book, and for this series.

Four books.* Four virtues.

One aim: to help you choose . . .

Courage, bravery, endurance, fortitude, honor, sacrifice . . .

Temperance, self-control, moderation, composure, balance . . .

Justice, fairness, service, fellowship, goodness, kindness . . .

Wisdom, knowledge, education, truth, self-reflection, peace . . .

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* This is book 4.

These are the key to the good life, a life of honor, of glory, of *excellence* in every sense. Character traits, which John Steinbeck perfectly described as "pleasant and desirable to [their] owner and makes him perform acts of which he can be proud and which he can be pleased." But the *he* must be taken to mean all of humankind. There was no feminine version of the word *virtus* in Rome. Virtue wasn't male or female, it just *was*.

It still is. It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. It doesn't matter if you're physically strong or painfully shy, a genius or of average intelligence. Virtue is universal. The imperative remains universal.

The virtues are interrelated and inseparable, yet each is distinct from the others. Doing the right thing almost always takes courage, just as moderation is impossible without the wisdom to know what is worth choosing. What good is courage if not applied to justice? What good is wisdom if it doesn't make us more modest?

North, south, east, west—the four virtues are a kind of compass (there's a reason that the four points on a compass are called the "cardinal directions"). They guide us. They show us where we are and what is true.

Aristotle described virtue as a kind of craft, something to pursue just as one pursues the mastery of any profession or skill. "We become builders by building and we become harpists by playing the harp," he writes. "Similarly, then, we become just by

doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions."

Virtue is something we do.

It's something we choose.

Not once, for Hercules's crossroads was not a singular event. It's a daily challenge, one we face not once but constantly, repeatedly. Will we be selfish or selfless? Brave or afraid? Strong or weak? Wise or stupid? Will we cultivate a good habit or a bad one? Courage or cowardice? The bliss of ignorance or the challenge of a new idea?

Stay the same . . . or grow?

The easy way or the right way?

Introduction

> The end of being is to know; and if you say the end of knowledge is action—why yes, but the end of that action again, is knowledge.
>
> —RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Of all the virtues, wisdom is the most elusive. It is something to which you aspire, something that we are always trying to acquire.

Yet we understand that we will almost certainly never arrive, not fully anyway, that at best, true wisdom is something we can only *approach*. Despite a lifetime of work, it exceeds our grasp each time, slipping with each step further into the distance, like the horizon that can never be reached.

The same elusiveness holds when we try to define wisdom. It's obviously more than being smart, more than the possession of knowledge and facts, more even than insight. It's intelligence, intuition, experience and education, philosophy and practical

understanding, awareness and wit, perspective, perspicacity, and, yes, the "prudence" that the ancients sometimes called wisdom.

It's all these things yet still, somehow, so much more.

So you're telling me you can't tell me what wisdom is or how to get it?

Yes. Welcome to life. It's complicated. Only a fool believes in simple step-by-step formulas.

Wisdom takes *work*. Like love and happiness and everything worthwhile, wisdom can't be accessed through hacks or shortcuts. Anyone who claims to have an easy way to get it is a liar, and anyone who claims to have it probably doesn't.

One thing we can say clearly about wisdom is that it isn't something you're born with.

And yet, certainly the other virtues are born from it—wisdom is called the mother of all virtues for precisely this reason. Can a person who doesn't understand risk be genuinely courageous? Without wisdom, how would they even know what to be courageous about? Does it not waste self-discipline to direct it at the wrong thing incorrectly or to do so inefficiently? You can have a good heart, but without competence, without savvy and perspective, your attempts at justice will surely fail.

Wisdom, then, we might say, is knowing . . .

. . . *what* to do,

. . . *when* to do it,

. . . and *how* to do it.

Wisdom is *knowing what's what.*

It's the ability to see what's in front of you with clarity. It's approaching an understanding of the way things work, why things happen, where things stand now, and what might happen next. It's not an encyclopedic knowledge of facts and figures but something both profound and applied—for it was not Gandhi's sharp legal mind that made him the mahatma.

If wisdom is hard to define, its opposite is not. Just as courage is complicated but cowardice is simple, so it goes with wisdom, a virtue whose elusiveness is in stark contrast to folly. We know a fool when we see one. We know we don't want to be that.

Just as no one is born wise, no one is born dumb—ignorant, sure, but remaining so is a choice. What will we choose?

Both wisdom and foolishness are a kind of asymptote. Some of us are further from the axis than others—some are smarter, some are more educated—but because the function is infinite, the possibilities are endless. There is always more to learn, more to know, more to understand about the world and yourself. The converse is also true: No matter how dumb someone seems to be, there is always room for surprise, for human stupidity is also infinite.

We pursue wisdom for one essential reason: We need it. Later and right now. Life is a thinking person's game. A decision about our future appears before us one day, a moral dilemma the next. Complex problems. Complicated people. Confusing situations. Hidden opportunities.

In these moments, big and small, the wisdom you need will either be there or it won't. The experience and knowledge and understanding will have been accumulated or not. We've either done the study necessary or we haven't. It is in that moment that we discover the reason that you can't spell *learned* without *earned.*

Wisdom, then, is a lagging indicator of work done long ago, the fruit nurtured from seed planted long ago. And, as the ancients taught us, we can only reap what has been sown.

THIS IS THE WAY

Seneca tells the story of a pretentious but lazy Roman. He wanted to be able to impress his educated friends, so instead of reading for hundreds of hours, he purchased a set of well-read slaves. One knew Homer by heart. Another knew Hesiod. He had a slave for Sappho, another for Pindar, and one for Simonides, one for each of the ancient Greek poets that an upper-class Roman was supposed to know inside and out.

He thought he was getting away with it, having these men feed him lines at dinner parties, on hand whenever he needed to look something up, until a friend suggested that he take wrestling lessons. "But I am weak and frail," the man replied. "Don't say that," his friend teased. "Consider how many perfectly healthy slaves you have!"

We all wish there was a way to get something for nothing, that we could fast forward to the part where we "have" it. We look for tricks and cheat codes, as if wisdom were possible without incredible amounts of effort, without a lifetime of study. This matter, Seneca reminds us, cannot be delegated to someone else.

There is no technology that can do it for you. There is no app. No teacher who can simply download everything into your brain. No guru who can lead you to enlightenment or shaman who can give it to you in a dose. It's not about what you're born with. It's about what you *do* with it.

The path of wisdom is not just rocky, it is guarded by bridge trolls and beset by obstacles. There are dead ends. There are pits of despair. There are staggering peaks and terrifying wonders. There is so much ground to cover. You will meet unfriendly people and unpleasant ideas along the way. Are you tough enough to handle that? Are you prepared for a long journey? Or do you want everything to be nice, neat, and easy?

Even if you are naturally gifted, even if you've already graduated from the best schools, wisdom is not yours. Still, Seneca writes, "much toil remains; to confront it, you must yourself lavish all your waking hours, and all your efforts, if you wish the result to be accomplished."

This book, then, is not a book *of* wisdom but rather a book about that work. It aims to explain the methods of some of the

wisest people who have ever lived as well as the traps that trip up the foolish. These aren't always methods our subjects articulated themselves. Wise people don't often talk about their wisdom, fools don't know they're foolish, but both have given us something better: their example.

Wisdom has been the work of great men and women for millennia, long before Socrates supposedly brought philosophy down from the heavens. We'll look at the ideas of Montaigne and Emerson—our guides in the book—alongside the hubris and stupidity of people who should have known better. We'll look at the patient, practical wisdom of Lincoln, and contrast it with the impulsive immaturity of so-called geniuses who, for all their brainpower, fail to understand so much.

Most of all, we'll look at the work they did—because nobody got their wisdom for free.

Like the other virtues, wisdom is a by-product of doing the right thing in the right way at the right time, not just once but consistently over the course of a life. It is the result of a method, and yet it is never actually possessed.

That's because *it is the method*.

Not a groundbreaking one either, but the same practices, the same questions people have posed and actions they've taken since they started roaming the earth. It's mentors and apprenticeships. It's studying history. It's reading, so much reading. It's seeking out experiences. It's delving, discovering, disassembling, discussing, debating, and demanding answers. It's focus

and observation. It's avoiding error—and learning from mistakes. It's self-evaluation. It's questioning our assumptions. It's remaining a student, no matter how old or accomplished we are.

The methods might be simple, but committing to them for a lifetime? The returns might be modest day to day, but over the course of a lifetime . . .

We can get wiser, but never wise.

Smarter but never smart.

Closer but never *there.*

Wisdom is available to anyone willing to earn it.

Wisdom is not comfortable.

Wisdom is a battle to be won.

Wisdom takes work.

Wisdom is worth it.

PART I

THE AGOGE
(YOUR TRAINING GROUND)

No man was ever wise by chance.

—SENECA

We must get it ourselves. No one can give us an education. The most important decision a person makes in their life is to become a student and to remain one not just in school or in their profession, but for life. There's a reason that wise people speak so little of wisdom. They are still too busy looking for it, still identifying as students themselves. A good education instills us with good morals, good ideas, good habits—the skillset that allows us to learn everything that the world is able to teach. What we put in our brain, especially early on but also on a daily basis, forms a kind of bank balance that we will draw on in the future. The practice we form now will sustain us . . . or betray us. We must become

students of history, of humanity. We must cultivate the ability to listen, to look, to learn. We must hone a powerful sense of curiosity, an insatiable desire to acquire knowledge. Charting our own course of study will require immense discipline and considerable courage. Let us begin.

A Most Unusual Education . . .

As the scion of a noble family, Michel de Montaigne should have spent his early days surrounded by servants and coddled in luxury. Instead, his parents sent their boy to live with a local peasant family—not out of neglect, but to give him something he couldn't get at home. Most wealthy children in the sixteenth century were handed over to wet nurses and nannies, but Montaigne, within sight of but a world away from the enormous estate that bore his name, was, in his words, "formed by fortune under the laws of the common people and of nature."

It was an unusual beginning to an unusual education, one that would continue until Montaigne took his last breath, at age fifty-nine.

After those early days in the bosom of his surrogate family, Montaigne was brought home, where his father decreed that no one would speak any language around his son but Latin. Instead of their local dialect of French, Montaigne lived in the world of Horace and Cato, coming naturally to the language the same way the ancients had.

Even residents of the village went along with the plan, and years later, Montaigne was surprised to hear one of them casually refer to a tool by its Latin name, so ingrained had the habit become for his sake. With no other languages allowed within earshot—his Latin tutor was German and didn't even know French—the mother tongue of philosophy came to the boy quickly and painlessly. The Romans had first come to Bordeaux around 60 BC, and Rome had fallen in the centuries since, but for Montaigne, Urbs Aeterna still stood eternal.

Soon enough, Montaigne was more fluent than his parents and more proficient than his tutor. "As for me," Montaigne would later recall, "I was over six before I understood any more French . . . than Arabic."

One might expect that an education this strict and directed—not to mention strange—would be joyless. Montaigne was lucky, for he was formed as much by love and tenderness as he was by these experiments. He would be taught Greek later, a bit more traditionally, but his father envisioned it as a game. Montaigne would recall the fun of volleying "conjugations back and forth" with his instructors, not even aware that he was learning. Montaigne recalled that in his father's travels abroad, educational experts advised him to shape his son's soul "entirely through gentleness and freedom," that his choices should be respected and that he should *love* to learn. Is it any surprise that Montaigne would go to his deathbed believing that he had the best father there ever was?

Only twice in his life was Montaigne ever physically disciplined—gently, he noted—something that many children today could not say and few could have said in the sixteenth century. Most mornings, he was awakened not by a nagging parent or a stern schoolmaster, but by beautiful songs of the musicians whom his father had hired. It was a way to teach his son music, but it was also a way to address a rather touching concern—startling the "tender brains of children" awake with a shake or a shout, his father believed, was borderline cruel.

At seven, Montaigne was reading Ovid for fun, already tired of patronizing kids' stories. But he wasn't just a bookworm. In the Montaigne household, everything was an opportunity to learn—even pranks or mistakes were material for discussions or lessons. Everything was designed to "serve as an excellent book," every situation provided a takeaway, even "some cheating by a page, some stupidity on the part of a lackey, something said at table," was a chance to discuss, to debate, to analyze. Everything was to be questioned. Every idea to be traced back to its original source. Great thinkers were turned to for advice and for answers, but they were not exempt from challenges. "Pass everything through a sieve," Montaigne would later say about how to educate a child, "and lodge nothing in his head on mere authority or trust."

He was taught not to be precious about mistakes, even encouraged to admit he'd made them. The important thing to teach kids, he said of the real lesson he'd learned in his youth, was

"that confessing an error which he discovers in his own argument even when he alone has noticed it is an act of justice and integrity, which are the main qualities he pursues." In Montaigne's family, stubbornness was a vice, belief in one's infallibility or superiority the only screwup to be ashamed of.

It must have been shocking the first time Montaigne stepped into a classroom, at the Collège de Guyenne, which his father had helped start. To suddenly be surrounded by other students, doing this thing called "school." As Montaigne would have known, the root of that word is the Greek word meaning "leisure." Then, as now, how distant the etymology is from reality.

Montaigne did not love how often he and his fellow students were "left to the melancholy humor of a furious schoolmaster." There was so much schoolwork, the days were interminable; he and his fellow students found it excruciating "slaving away for fourteen and fifteen hours a day like a porter." They were forced to memorize and recite and translate passages as if these noises and sounds and symbols were a replacement for understanding. It is tragic, Montaigne felt, but not a surprise, how many kids hate going to school and, sadder still, how many teachers hate their students.

Just as birds carry food in their beaks "without tasting it to stuff it down the beaks of their young," Montaigne said, "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." His fellow students who could repeat

what they'd learned from their teachers? They were no more than parrots. "To know by heart is not to know," Montaigne would say later, "it is to keep what they have given you and store it in your memory."

School taught him the basics: math, logic, poetry. But he dreamed of gaining control over his own studies, and later was envious to learn that Socrates would let his pupils do most of the talking.

Unlike his schooling, the rest of his early education was *active*. Dancing, horseback riding, handling a pike, playing an instrument, he took instruction in it all. Montaigne and his brothers both learned the French game of tennis, which was unusual, for athletics were not considered important. Montaigne joked that many of his fellow students would have been better off if they had *only* received tennis lessons, because they would have been spared the school and at least gotten in shape. They would have also been spared, he noted, the ego that came along with the sense that they were educated. In any case, he was raised to be not some effete intellectual, but an active and vigorous young man.

The saving grace of any institution of learning is its teachers. For all the flaws and frustrations of his traditional education, Montaigne was blessed with several great teachers. One, George Buchanan, was in Bordeaux fleeing religious persecution. The future tutor of kings was a long way from home, and he was able to give the young Montaigne a worldly perspective.

Buchanan loved theater and staged many plays at school, dragging this unusual boy into performing in them.

Perhaps Buchanan was the teacher Montaigne later credited for encouraging his reading habit. In a time when books were expensive and censorship commonplace, this teacher understood that Montaigne's curiosity could not be satisfied by the school syllabus. They came to an agreement: As long as Montaigne could keep up with the school's assignments, he was free to explore on his own. We can imagine Buchanan nudging Montaigne this way and that, even lending him copies from his own library. "Pretending to see nothing," Montaigne said gratefully, "he whetted my appetite, letting me gorge myself with these books only in secret."

It was a brilliant stroke too, for Montaigne watched as so many of his fellow students came away from school hating to read.

One of the books he found was a beautiful folio copy of the works of Terence, edited by the scholar Erasmus, which Montaigne bought for himself in 1549, at age sixteen. He was still reading and rereading it late in life, finding it impossible, each time he picked Terence up, "not to find in him some new beauty and grace."

He finished school several years ahead of schedule. He had done well. He had had a better experience than most. "But for all that," he said, summarizing his college experience, "it was still school." What did he have to show for his years there?

Nothing compared to what he'd gotten at home, where he'd learned to love to learn.

The aim of education has always been to spark curiosity, the desire to understand the world and one's place in it. Often, this is precisely what is later snuffed out.

Of all the inheritances the boy would get—which would include enormous tracts of land, a winery, and a castle—this was his greatest blessing. "He grew up constrained by some of the most bizarre limits ever imposed on a child," Montaigne's biographer Sarah Bakewell observed, "and at the same time had almost unlimited freedom. He was a world unto himself."

Yet eventually, like all graduates, Montaigne had to enter the actual world. His father had always understood that his son's education was not merely for its own sake but to prepare the boy to run the family business, to hold office, to be a leader, to contribute to society by being a torchbearer for values that not long ago had been lost in a "dark age." Perhaps Montaigne would have loved to remain a scholar, but life—and his father—had other plans.

"To school-learning he owes but the first fifteen or sixteen years of his life," Montaigne wrote later; "the rest is owed to action." We all face this transition, from school to experience, from the classroom to the school of life. All the things that Montaigne had read about—Greek democracy, the Roman Empire, the law cases of Cicero, the power of the medieval church—he would

now come face-to-face with, not in the glow of the golden age but in the messy, muddy present moment.

After his legal studies, Montaigne found himself working as a magistrate in the Bordeaux Parlement, a job that involved assessing complex legal cases and liaising with different courts. In those days, magistrates were considered and interviewed along two very different lines. One approach, which is used to this day, was to evaluate an applicant's academic performance and ability by testing them on their knowledge. A simpler approach was to give a future magistrate a case to judge and see how they performed, which would reveal how their mind worked.

The latter was a superior procedure, Montaigne noted, "even though both those are necessary and both needed together, nevertheless the talent for knowledge is less to be prized than that for judging. Judgment can do without knowledge, but not knowledge without judgment."

Montaigne almost certainly got his job through the connections of his father, but over the fifteen years he held the job, he came to understand that knowing the law and *understanding* it were very different things. He would have learned, as great legal minds have all learned, that theory has to be made to fit reality and not the other way around, and that only real, painful experience can teach someone how to master their profession.

Much had been left out of the books, Montaigne quickly

realized when he encountered the complexities of the human heart or considered the ambiguity of outcomes. Not that his colleagues approached their profession with much thought. Montaigne would recall with horror watching a judge he knew to be unfaithful to his wife sentence a defendant for the very same crime, just before writing his mistress a love note.

Year after year on the job, Montaigne developed this judgment—about what makes people tick, how to spot a liar, how to get to the truth of the matter. It was for this reason that he was recruited to serve at the court of King Charles IX and why, at the end of his legal career, he was awarded the Order of Saint Michael, effectively French knighthood.

To enter the real world is a shock to all young people. The transition from the realm of ideas to the realm of kings and criminal courts was always going to be a messy and disappointing one, but the France that Montaigne navigated and inhabited must have seemed like it was unraveling.

A generation earlier, Michelangelo had painted the Sistine Chapel. Magellan had circumnavigated the globe. Copernicus had displaced the earth from the center of the universe. The Renaissance had flowered, bringing with it beautiful art and earth-shattering awakenings. A new world was discovered across the Atlantic. As word of different cultures trickled back, even man's sense of the size and shape of the globe had to be reconsidered.

Alongside discovery and invention, however, came destabi-

lization. The church, which had long been a unifying force, had been undermined by these new forms of thought, by the new technologies that spread new ideas. There was, in Montaigne's expression, a common belief that "the world is turned upside down." For the first time, people began to question the oppressive role that priests played in society, and even more generally, they began to ask, *Why are things this way?* and *Should they continue this way?*

Martin Luther tacked his theses to the door of the church. Reformation and Counter-Reformation followed. Riots and unrest ensued. New faiths emerged, and they battled not just for their right to exist but for the power to crush all others as heresies. Inquisitions and persecution raged. The flower of the Renaissance withered up there on the scaffold. The tolerance and acceptance of the Enlightenment lay *centuries* in the future. It was, and remained, as one scholar said, a world still lit only by fire.

In 1562, Montaigne, then serving Charles IX, witnessed the carnage from the siege of Rouen, a violent Catholic insurrection in which more than a thousand people were killed in a bloody clash over religious tensions dividing France. Just a few months earlier, the Duke of Guise had massacred dozens of French Huguenots attending a church service in the town of Vassey. A year later, the duke himself would be gunned down by the side of the road by another French nobleman who lay in wait. When the assassin was caught, he was drawn and

quartered—except the sentence was botched, and when the man's limbs failed to be ripped from their sockets after multiple attempts, he was finally put out of his misery by the executioner's sword.

Reprisal followed reprisal, culminating in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, when tens of thousands were killed, the dead dumped into the Seine.

All this must have seemed particularly horrifying to a man who had been taught intellectual humility, who believed that ideas should be questioned and that humans were prone to error. "It is to take one's conjectures rather seriously," Montaigne would say, "to roast someone alive for them." Yet this was common practice over the course of his life; thousands of people were burned at the stake for mostly imagined crimes. In the Inquisition, multiple relatives of Montaigne had been burned to death, including a great-great-great-grandfather.

The French Wars of Religion lasted for decades, claiming the lives of over a million people, many in almost indescribably heinous ways.

How far this was from the idyllic and sheltered days of his youth, when his father had protected him from the carnage and its fallout all around him, when his teachers smiled upon him, encouraging all his curiosity and eccentricity.

In a world still medieval in practice, defined by fear and persecution, being a free or unconventional thinker was a risky proposition. So was standing out. As new-money merchants,

the Montaigne family could not help it. Montaigne's mother's side of the family were Marranos, Spanish Jews who during the Inquisition converted to Christianity under the threat of death. His paternal uncles were Protestant.

When Montaigne read about people different from himself, especially observations about the just-discovered peoples living in the "New World," he was curious rather than judgmental. "So many humors, sects, judgments, opinions, laws, and customs teach us to judge sanely of our own," he said. Did the people of the Amazon draw and quarter one another, burn one another at the stake, accuse one another of black magic? Who was actually the barbarian?

Later, he would strike a coin for himself to carry as a reminder. "I reserve judgment," it said. He would not be sucked into fanaticism and fundamentalism. He would not take part in quarrels and conflict. He would not chase what everyone else chased or strive to beat or surpass anyone. He would keep a cool head while the rest of the world lost theirs.

This discipline, this tolerance, did not win him the friends it should have. He sensed that he was a man without a country. He knew he had a target on his back. "I was belabored from every quarter," Montaigne lamented; "to the Ghibelline I was a Guelph, to the Guelph, a Ghibelline." Those who refuse to pick sides . . . make twice as many enemies.

He must have sensed he was reaching the end of the road of public service—how could a person attend to the affairs of state

when murder and persecution were publicly accepted? When had extremism become commonplace? When had the future felt so uncertain?

"Only he knows," the novelist Stefan Zweig would write, as he turned to Montaigne's works during the early days of the rise of Nazism, "that no task on earth is more burdensome and difficult than to maintain one's intellectual and moral independence and preserve it unsullied through a mass cataclysm." To not be made crazy by the craziness around you demands courage and discipline and justice and wisdom.

The cataclysm came for Montaigne at the end of the 1560s, in an unexpected way. Out for a ride on his estate, Montaigne smashed into another rider at full speed and was thrown to the ground. As his friends carried his broken, dying body to the house, Montaigne felt his life escaping him, his soul all but dancing on the tip of his lips.

Just as suddenly, life returned, and Montaigne was given a second chance. "Imagine that you have died," Marcus Aurelius writes in *Meditations*. "Now take what's left of your life and live it properly."

Marcus is one of the few Stoics Montaigne never quotes, but he got the idea. In the light of this near-death experience, the law didn't seem so important. The affairs and rituals of court must have seemed almost painfully stupid, even grotesque.

So he walked away.

"In the year of Christ 1571," he wrote in an inscription in

the Latin he had learned by his father's methods, "Michel Montaigne, aged 38, on his birthday, the day preceding the Calends of March, already long wearied of the servitude of the law courts, and of public offices, has retired, with faculties still entire, to the arms of the learned virgins, there to pass in all quiet and security such length of days as remain to him, of his already more than half-spent years, if the fates permit him to finish this abode and these sweet ancestral retreats consecrated to his freedom and tranquility and leisure."

Here, then, in this library, the man whose education had so long been directed or supervised was taking the reins fully in his hands. His father was dead, his career lifeless. He himself had nearly died. His life was now half over or more, having been dedicated to studying other people, working on other people's problems.

Now he said, *Enough*, and put himself to following that ancient command from the great Oracle at Delphi: *Know thyself.*

For the first few years after the accident, it seemed all Montaigne did was read. In a tower on the estate his father had left him, he arranged his books on long, wraparound shelves that hugged the walls of the circular building. He could take in his entire library in a glance, thousands of books, a life of learning arrayed before him. Montaigne turned the room his father had used as a chapel into a temple of wisdom. "Books are my kingdom," he said. "And here I seek to reign as absolute lord."

When he wasn't reading he was thinking, luxuriating in his

own company and the freedom to nurture his own thoughts, to exercise his mind.

"He wanders about the room," one biographer portrays Montaigne in his element, "taking from his shelves one book after another, opening them at random, reading a scrap, and then talking about it. On he goes, talking wisely, wittily, kindly, while the flickering firelight plays over his sensitive, intelligent face, and the Fascon moon shines in patches on the floor, till the world we are used to dissolves under his talk and its constituent parts wave and flicker with the firelight."

On the shelves was his copy of Terence from school. There were the Stoics. There was Lucretius, Horace, Virgil, and Diogenes Laertius. There was his beloved Plutarch. "What profit will he not get out of reading the *Lives* of our favorite Plutarch!" Montaigne would say rapturously, celebrating this ancient biographer not for the way he recorded the "date of the fall of Carthage . . . as the behavior of Hannibal and Scipio; less . . . the name of the place where Marcellus died as to how his death there showed him unworthy of the task."

Montaigne had taken pains to carve some of his favorite quotes into the beams of the ceiling of his study, right above the books. Many were from Sextus Empiricus, the Greek philosopher. ΟΥ ΚΑΤΑΛΑΜΒΑΝΩ (I do not understand). ΕΠΕΧΩ (I stop.) ΣΚΕΠΤΟΜΑΙ (I examine). From Terence, "I am a man and nothing human is foreign to me." From Socrates, "Im-

piety follows pride like a dog." From Pliny, "The only certainty is that nothing is certain." And of course, from Epictetus, "That which worries men is not things but that which they think about them."

Is it any wonder, then, that when Montaigne sat down to write, he began with a question and not a statement? "*Que sais-je?*" *What do I know?* What did Montaigne know about himself? What had he learned from his unique education? From his books? From his peasant godparents? From his father? From his teachers? What did he *really*, truly know?

Stepping back from the deranged violence of his time, he decided to explore the human condition in the form of rambling meditations, some no more than a page, some almost the length of a short book. An essay, it would be called, or, in French, *an attempt*.

Montaigne wrote on many topics—fear, idleness, affection we feel for our children, cruelty, experience. He also wrote about his favorite authors, and the cannibals he'd heard about in the New World. But the topics of these essays were, at most, a jumping-off point—an excuse to explore and consider *anything* that struck him as interesting. And in the end, they all came back to the main character in his search, himself. "I would rather be an authority on myself than on Cicero," he said.

"He follows his subject as a young dog follows a carriage hounding off the road a hundred times to investigate the neigh-

borhood," one biographer writes. "His loose-limbed mind is easy, light, yet serious. He pares away the rind of things, smelling the fruit joyously. . . . He is a considerer, an examiner, a skeptic. He prowls about the beliefs, the opinions and usage, of men, and, taking up a thought, lifts from it, one by one, as if he were peeling an artichoke, the envelopes of custom, of prejudices, of time, of place. He holds up the opinion of one school, praising and admiring it, and then the contradictory opinion of another school, praising and admiring that. In his scales he balances notion against notion, man against man, usage against usage."

Being born into a world that was so chaotic had presented Montaigne with an opportunity. For too long, the church had been the authority on everything. Still, too much knowledge lay cloistered in monasteries, inaccessible and impractical. For centuries, the individual had been told they were insignificant. Truths long held as irrefutable were proved laughably incorrect by Columbus and Copernicus. Basic questions that had long gone unasked, and certainly remained unanswered, were now bubbling to the surface. Simply the fact that no one had ever really written an essay before is case in point!

Staring at his cat one day, entertaining it with a toy, he stopped and wondered, "Who is toying with whom?" His essays abound with animal stories, intended to illustrate that there is a vast, beautiful world out there that we hardly experi-

ence, in some cases that we can't even begin to imagine. What was his cat thinking when he played with it? Who was he to that cat? He is just as baffled by his own anatomy, his sex drive, his emotions. He just wants to *know* anything and everything.

How fresh this all was. How new and transgressive, even. The idea that learning mattered, that truth mattered, that Montaigne—that the individual—was a topic worth exploring. But just because some of it was simple, just because it was fun, doesn't mean the answers were easy. It is a "thorny enterprise," he said, "of following a path as wandering as that of the mind and penetrating the dark depths of its inner folds." It was, he wanted the reader to know, *more difficult than it looked.*

For nearly a decade Montaigne noodled on these essays, which came to fill more than a thousand pages in all—writing them primarily for his own benefit, and in the process creating a very different kind of "self-improvement." Would anyone care? As civil war tore through France, as people fought over scraps of religious doctrine, he waged a war against his own ignorance, exploring the things that make human beings strange and wonderful. This would be his lasting contribution to humanity—he pulled at the thread that artists and journalists and social scientists and psychologists and memoirists have been weaving with since.

In 1580, he published his first essays, which quickly made their way to the homes of nearly every literate gentleman in

France. King Henry III read a copy. Francis Bacon read and loved them. In 1603, when Montaigne was translated into English, a self-taught playwright (and fellow lover of Plutarch) named William Shakespeare bought a copy—indeed, a passage from Montaigne appears deftly cribbed in *The Tempest* and may well have inspired one of his most famous lines, "This above all: To thine own self be true." The books Montaigne had written solely for himself turned out to be for everyone, and became what we would call bestsellers (and remain so to this day).

Montaigne celebrated the completion of his work and its success by doing something he had not gotten to do for many years: travel. Ostensibly, he had to get from France to Italy for business, but mostly he was using the trip as a chance to see new places and have new experiences, and all the while, he kept learning and writing and taking stuff in.

Here he is exploring some old ruin. Here he is under a tree, reading a book. Here he is in the streets of Rome speaking aloud to Caesar and Cicero, "mutter[ing] their great names between my teeth and mak[ing] them resound in my ears." Here he is in an inn, his essays laid out before him, delighted by something he'd written or, when he was embarrassed by it, not hesitating to change it. Here he is struck by a bit of inspiration, dictating a few sentences to his page as they trot along. Here he is with some new book he's purchased, adding yet another heavy volume into his saddlebags. "Books are," he said, "the best provisions a man can take with him on life's journey."

Ultimately, he could not completely withdraw from public life. No wise man can. He consulted on fortifications for Parlement. He was named Gentleman of the Chamber by Henri de Navarre, the next king of France. He hosted important guests for dinner. He went on diplomatic missions. He corresponded with the leading minds of his time. He was elected mayor of Bordeaux, now a large and important city, and then reelected. At one point, the persecution he had dreaded came, and he was thrown in the Bastille, but now his fame saved him, and he was freed by Catherine de' Medici. Through it all though, he was still reading, still writing, still revising his essays. Even in the last months of his life, he was consulting King Henry III, trying to make him into a philosopher-king.

He had asked in Rome to be made an honorary citizen, but in fact, he was a citizen of the world. A friend to himself and to all, he lived outside time and place—residing and conversing with "the worthiest minds, who lived in the best ages"—and had since boyhood.

He made his mark not in the political arena, not on the battlefield, not even in the form of scientific breakthroughs or some work of scholarship. Instead, he persisted in the educational experiment that dated back to his childhood, his father's vision for his son, and the son's effort to prove himself worthy of all the expectation and effort that his teachers had put on him. He had explored an unknown and unprecedented new continent—himself.

He had asked more questions than he had answered, read more than he wrote, saw more than he understood. He tried to put himself and his times in perspective. "It will be a lot," he wrote, "if a hundred years from now people remember in a general way that in our time there were civil wars in France." He knew he would be largely forgotten. He refused to despair. He declined to write humanity off. And in this, he was a truly wise man.

What can we say we know, what can we say we have learned from the life of Montaigne? First, that education is something that does not end. We know that an education, even if directed by someone else at the beginning, eventually reverts into our own hands—we must teach ourselves if we are to learn anything. We know from Montaigne that ego is the enemy of wisdom, that conceit is the impediment to knowledge. We take from his example the need to be always curious, always questioning, always open, always ready to learn something new. And finally, we understand that we learn in order to live, that all accomplishments pale in comparison to that rarest of rare things, *self-awareness*.

His education began with a fresh vision and relied on unconventional methods, the most unique being that it never stopped. As a young man, he explained, "I studied in order to show off; later, a little, to make myself wiser; now I do it for amusement, never for profit."

He kept learning until the day he died, and indeed, the questions that he asked, the inner journey he so eloquently described, continues on through each of us today.

If we are brave and disciplined enough to pick up the task he lays before us.

Talk to the Dead

He had come from Phoenicia. It had been a long journey, traveling from port to port across the Mediterranean, trading in purple dye, the color of the cloaks worn by the wealthiest Greeks.

But today, young Zeno was not traveling on business.

As he wound along the Sacred Way, toward the Temple of Apollo, home of the Oracle at Delphi, he began the sacred rituals, washing his hands in the holy spring. He lit a stick of incense. The flickering light of torches lined his path to the inner sanctum, where the priestess waited for his question.

What is the secret to a good life?

"You will become wise," the priestess told Zeno, "when you begin to have conversations with the dead."

It took many years and a terrible accident for him to understand what she meant. At thirty, Zeno found himself in Athens, shipwrecked and penniless. He passed a bookseller in the agora