A Morning with Montaigne

F. M. Kercheville

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq

Recommended Citation
A Morning With Montaigne

By F. M. Kercheville

“Bon jour, Monsieur Montaigne, comment allez-vous ce beau matin?” asks a young college professor whom we shall call Figaro.

The young man is addressing the shade of that long departed French “gentleman” of the Renaissance but recently returned from the shadows of Purgatory.

“Bon jour, bon jour, mon bon ami! Figaro. It’s quite some time since I’ve seen you. And how is life treating you now, mon ami?” answers the ghost of the shrewd little Frenchman. “How are conditions in your own America? You look somewhat nervous and puzzled, my friend.”

Figaro: I am nervous and more than somewhat puzzled I assure you, and I seek you out as a tonic for a case of nerves. But tell me how is it that you still have that twinkle in your eye, that you are not dead after these four hundred years? What’s your secret for remaining alive?

Montaigne: Ah, mon ami, one has but to keep up with the times to defeat death. Do you not remember the words of my fellow countryman who said “Man is only a reed, but he’s a thinking reed,” and the words of the great Spaniard which go something like this “el polvo que piensa nunca muere” (dust that thinks never dies)? And you ask me why I am yet alive? Have you forgotten that genuine thought is never obsolete? Do you not know that a thinker is always contemporary?

Figaro: Now I know that you are indeed my old friend, Montaigne, for only a Frenchman could have such nerve. You were never given to excessive modesty. But let’s leave the subject of death, and come to a question that is really alive. I should like very much to interview you on the subject of education, since you’ve [19]
been watching us for so long from a front row seat in Purgatory.

Montaigne: Now indeed do I recognize you as my American friend. You will not be content with a mere chat or a conversation. You must have an interview. Think you, mon ami, that you are helping me out of Purgatory when you ask me to discuss modern education? Is that your idea of a sense of humor? What would you have me say on the subject of education? You'll find my views in a little series of essays which I once wrote on rainy days when I had nothing else to do. I've learned little since, although I've followed your modern movements quite closely. Don't you have enough education in America?

Figaro: Sure we have plenty of education in America. Why we have more colleges and universities than Greece had gods. But that's not the point. You broke with the so-called "schools" and the stiff, formal yoke of Aristotle. How did you do it? And why did you start out for yourself?

Montaigne: That's quite simple, my friend. I merely set for myself the task of learning about other men while I studied myself, and I made it a point to always support the free and unprejudiced examination of all questions. The schoolmen of my day held to the queer idea that education was some strange thing entirely separated from the thing we call life. Instead of trying to live an education they were trying to teach the thing by rote. I merely told them that instead of making men by that system they were only making "puits de science." I could have used the word "vacuums," but I was never given to too much satire, as you know.

Figaro: Then why did the schools hate you so bitterly?

Montaigne: Just human nature I suppose. You see I told them that education was in reality life itself, and that the youth should be taught life as it really is, that he
should be taught to look about him, and learn to judge things as they are. I shouted in their fossilized ears “pas de pedantisme; l’exemple de la vie vaut tous les livres.” Between you and me that sentence caused all the trouble. Why the old fellows gnashed their teeth and all but murdered me.

**Figaro:** But you were not bluffing, my dear Montaigne, you really believe in this thing called education?

**Montaigne:** My young fellow, you know I was always, and still am quite skeptical of these dogmatic friends of mine who say so glibly “I believe” or “I know.” I had much rather take my position among those who say “que sais je?” You doubtless know that some critic attributed that phrase to me. I didn’t actually originate the expression, but if the critics say so (we must respect our critics you know) I am willing to accept the honor. But back to your question. Yes, my young man, in so far as I really believe anything, I believe that the most important field in the realm of human knowledge is that which treats of the education of the youth. I’ve committed myself. Now “shoot the works.” Isn’t that what you say in good American slang?

**Figaro:** Monsieur Montaigne, just how would you start the child in the great quest for light?

**Montaigne:** First I’d find out his natural inclinations. You must not force a child to follow a course for which he has not the least taste or desire.

**Figaro:** Why we’ve been doing that for years in America. We have hundreds of special examiners, and boards for vocational guidance. You cannot but compliment us on that, my friend.

**Montaigne:** A move in the right direction, yes. But you are still a thousand miles from your goal. You still waste your time and energy trying to make a lawyer or a priest out of little Johnny when any fool could see
that little Johnny would make a much better business man or a poet as the case may be.

Figaro: What about the teacher, Monsieur, what kind of teachers would you choose for the child?

Montaigne: Ah, my young friend, now you come to the point. Upon the correct choice of a teacher depends the whole success of the scheme. Choose an "habil homme" rather than merely "un homme savant." A teacher should be a well rounded man, a leader instead of a dandruff-covered encyclopedia. He should have rather a head "bien faite que bien pleine."

Figaro: That's fine. Now we agree on something. America is certainly stepping forward along this line. We have Teachers Colleges, Teachers Training Courses, and Normal Schools all over the country. Why almost every town has its own normal school. We require the M.A. and in many cases the Ph.D. degree, and our specialists now reach all the way from the primary grade to the post graduate. Specialization is something new, something that America has given the world.

Montaigne: No, my young fellow, specialization is not new in the world. It began long ago when the fencing master was separated from the dancing master in order to relieve unemployment. I've watched your America for years in the matter of specialization. I must say you've gone insane on that point as well as on the matter of degrees. You have teachers with degrees a yard long showing students the way to wisdom who know so little of life that one could lose them in their own backyards.

Figaro: Thanks. I'll take a note on that. Now what is your opinion about mass teaching and routine. We are stressing individual attention now in America. Surely you'll agree that we are correct in this original conception of ours.
Montaigne: Correct, yes, but hardly original. I insisted on that point until I was blue in the face some four hundred years ago. The twentieth century is still behind me on that score, and with your mass-production and mass-education in America, may I predict that you will trail me yet for another four centuries.

Figaro: What would you most seek to train in the youth, Monsieur Montaigne?

Montaigne: His judgment, his judgment, by all means. Steer him away from dogmatism and blind belief in authority. His only reverence should be for the truth. Develop in him the attitude of the tolerant, open-minded thinker with a judgment of his own, firm but not dogmatic. Teach him to make up his own mind. "Ne loge rien en sa tête par autorité" I cried to the school masters in my day, and they almost mobbed me. Dogmatism and pedantry are still rank in the world even in your own United States of America. These two evils are deeply imbedded and hydra-headed. No independent thinking can be done when either is present. I have watched your American educational system, and allow me to tell you that individual thinking among the products that you turn out each year remains at almost as high a premium as it was in my own school days. You kill the interest of your best students with too much red tape. As a proof of this where is your "Youth Movement" in America? In many countries the youth are leading in liberal thoughts in the realms of politics, government, economics and religion. In some countries they have actually started social revolutions. Furthermore many of your lesser so-called scientists are just as dogmatic and as intolerant of a difference of opinion as was my old professor of rhetoric. You'll pardon me for losing my usual calm and detachment but I feel very strongly upon this point.
Figaro: You certainly must have been touched to the quick on that issue, mon ami. In a recent review of your essays, I gathered as much. You insist, then, on judgment, assimilation, and independent thinking. Many people think these are ultra modern conceptions developed by our own leaders in education. In fact, they almost confessed as much.

Montaigne: Men are always willing to confess their own greatness and originality. On this all men are more or less human. No one who ever really studied the history of education could possibly believe that such conceptions are modern.

Figaro: What, in your opinion, would best help the student to develop his judgment?

Montaigne: Encourage him to rub elbows with real life. Allow him to mix and mingle with all kinds and classes of men. Foreign travel is excellent for this development.

Figaro: And you advocated that four hundred years ago? I thought that was another of our most modern ideas. We in America talk much of cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and are probably the world's greatest tourists. Do you realize that?

Montaigne: Precisely. You are the world's greatest tourists. And therein lies one of your greatest weaknesses. You don't really travel, you tour. All the touring on earth will never make a citizen of the world. After such sight-seeing trips are over, your average citizen's world is still limited to the length of his nose. He remains like the poor devil in the hail storm, who, because his own head is being pelted, thinks the whole world is in a tempest of hail.

Figaro: And would you have your student study foreign languages?

Montaigne: By all means. But be sure and connect his language study with life and literature. Your foreign lan-
language teaching in America is largely a failure. In many cases it is a farce. You don’t begin early enough. I would have the student begin his study of languages in his early years. If he does not form language habits early, his tongue will be no longer supple enough. You may teach a grandfather to read Greek, but you’ll never teach him to speak a modern foreign language. As the nations of the world come closer and closer together in every field of human endeavor, even you in isolated America will be forced to learn a few foreign tongues. You will no longer be able to say “by God, we speak English or we don’t talk.” You have a lot to learn in this respect. A few of us foreigners had a good laugh even in gloomy Purgatory when you stopped the study of German in a World War with Germany. If you ever needed to study German it was at that time. With the years you will outgrow such foolish prejudices.

**Figaro:** Then you don’t believe in sight-seeing tours, and silly smatterings of foreign languages?

**Montaigne:** I have no objections to seeing the sights of the world, if the sight-seeing be accompanied by understanding. Your average student in his rubber-neck bus is a plague. The foreigner laughs at him while he fleeces him of his American gold. The poor devil makes France in three weeks, skips through the Louvre in thirty-five minutes, and thinks that the only justification for the provinces is to supply the wine which he sips in a Paris café.

**Figaro:** My dear Monsieur Montaigne, may I say that I think you are entirely too severe in your criticism of the tourist, and even a bit dogmatic. But back to our interview on education. What is your opinion on the question of the education of the body, physical education we call it in our modern and original manner? Have you any suggestion on that subject?
Montaigne: In one of my favorite sixteenth century essays I stated that to train the mind and neglect the body is a crime. Strong muscles and a good brain should go hand in hand. My exact words in French were and still are "Ce n’est pas assez de lui roidir l’âme; il lui faut aussi roidir les muscles."

Figaro: Then you actually advocated a system of physical education four centuries ago. To think that such a modern idea was original with you. In America we have thousands of supervisors, organizers, coaches, and hundreds of different games.

Montaigne: Mon ami, you err greatly in attributing that idea to me. I should like to accept the compliment and the honor, but the memory of the Spartans and the Athenians deters me. Yes, you do exceedingly well with your games in America, but you sometimes forget to enjoy the game in your passion for organization, and you often have more coaching than genuine playing. You have made what you call in slang a racket out of certain of your best games.

Figaro: Then you would keep more of the play element in the development of the body. We are most certainly stressing that idea in America today. Now if I get you straight, mon cher Montaigne, you would develop the whole man in any system of education, neglecting no part of the student’s mental and physical make up? Am I correct in my deduction?

Montaigne: Most correct you are. To neglect to train the whole man is to produce a pedant or a pack horse. Too much theorizing and not enough action will produce your proverbial book-worm. In my now famous tower-library in France I wrote long, long ago "Nous ne cherchons ici de former un grammarien ou logicien, mais un gentil homme." The teacher should not be judged by the size of his library but by the depth of his knowledge of life.
Figaro: Then, my dear Montaigne, you still insist on a closer connection between education and life?
Montaigne: I most certainly do. Allow me to repeat, mon ami, that "l'exemple de la vie vaut tous les livres." The youth must be made to realize that he is really living at the same time that he is being educated, and that he is being educated for a fuller and better life to be lived right here on this earth. Any insistence on knowledge other than as a means to such an end will continue to result in the turning out of "anes chargés de livres" in your free American speech "jackasses loaded down with text books." Thus you have the gist of my opinions on education.

Figaro: That is all very well. But we of America cannot help but remember that in the flesh you were a nobleman, my friend, and knew nothing of democracy, mass education, and especially co-education. Any opinion on these?
Montaigne: You are unkind in saying I know nothing of democracy. You will admit that a sojourn of four centuries in Purgatory has given me pause to think. In all of that time, I have changed but little on that question. Your other two propositions are bound up in democracy. In the meantime I shall be careful to keep an open mind on your question of democracy and mass education. At present you will admit that things do not look so favorable to the cause. Some day you may prove me wrong, que sais-je? Please believe me, my friend, that in so far as I believe anything, I believe in the principles of true education, and in the democracy of open minds.

Figaro: In closing this interview, my dear Montaigne, allow me to thank you for giving me this time, and to express to you my compliments on such great originality shown by you four hundred years ago.
Montaigne: Pardon me, my young friend. I would not be rude, but you are quite presumptuous in assuming that you, a young professor, can even recognize an original mind. All that I wrote I either borrowed or stole from the ancients. I am not original. Nothing is original but ignorance. I assimilated what I borrowed or stole and merely sought to connect it, in some way with life. “L’exemple de la vie vaut . . .”

With this the ghost of Montaigne faded away, and the shade of the shrewd little Frenchman took its place once more with the immortals in the front row of Purgatory. Figaro, the young professor, heard a sudden ringing in his ears, picked up an armful of texts and rushed to class, smiling to himself and feeling more than ever like an “ane chargé de livres.”