Because He Was He, and I Was I

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> *I quote others only in order the better to express myself.*
> —Michel de Montaigne

In 1571, a French nobleman bought a château in Bordeaux with a round stone tower attached to it. He was thirty-eight, newly retired from public life, gutted by the death of his closest friend, and unsure what came next.

He withdrew to the tower. Had the beams and ceiling inscribed with sentences from ancient writers he loved. And there, with his books and his increasingly unreliable body, he began to write.

He called the writing *essais*. Attempts. These were not conclusions or treatises or proof of anything. Just a man trying to think honestly about what it meant to be alive, using himself as the only available evidence.

His name was Michel de Montaigne. He wrote for twenty years, revised obsessively, and published during his lifetime to a reception that ranged from genuine bafflement to outright offense. His contemporaries wanted a book of philosophical maxims and what they got instead was a man describing his fear of death, his bowel movements, and why he preferred his cat's company to most people's. Pascal called it an act of immoral self-absorption. The Church put it on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1676, nearly three-quarters of a century after his death. Montaigne, who had died in 1592 at fifty-nine, had no way of knowing that his book would still be read five centuries later, on every continent, by people whose recognition of themselves in his pages would have astonished him far more than the offense ever did.

Montaigne's *Essays* has never gone out of print. Shakespeare read it and lifted from it liberally. Nietzsche said it increased his joy in living. Virginia Woolf called it the first real attempt in literature to write the truth about oneself. Emerson, who absorbed Montaigne so completely that the borrowing became structural rather than occasional, said simply that it seemed to him as if he had written the book himself.

For five hundred years readers have said some version of what Emerson said. You pick up Montaigne expecting a historical artifact and find a person sitting across a table, impatient and curious and funny and self-contradicting, talking to you like a friend, like you're worth talking to. He writes about friendship and grief and the body and bad faith and the strange persistent fact of being a *self*. He changes his mind mid-sentence. He admits often to not knowing. He includes the parts that make him look bad. In an age that has made performance of certainty the primary unit of public identity, the effect of reading Montaigne is something close to *decompression*.

Antoine Compagnon's *A Summer with Montaigne* is forty short chapters, each built around a single passage from the *Essays*. A good introduction for anyone who hasn't read him, and exactly the kind of book I was looking for after several returns to the *Essays*. Something I could open anywhere, read for twenty minutes, and put down feeling like I'd just had a conversation rather than fought my way through one.

I read it the way I read anything that clearly knows something I don't, slowly, with a pen, occasionally out loud, and over and over again. In forty chapters I flagged many passages. Five made it here. What follows is five separate essays, each built around one of those passages. The neuroscience of daydreaming turns up. So does grief, what Rousseau's vanity operation reveals about honest writing, why two men centuries apart turned loss into the longest conversation they ever had, and what James Pennebaker's research suggests about the examined life.

Montaigne appears in these essays the way he'd have wanted to, as a starting point rather than a destination. He used Seneca and Plutarch the same way, thinking *against* them rather than *after* them. He strongly believed that an honest self-portrait, done with enough care, might turn out to be useful to someone else.

Five hundred years of readers have yet to prove him wrong.

Essay One: Friendship

> *If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I.*
> —Michel de Montaigne

Montaigne met Étienne de La Boétie in 1558 and spent the next four years in what he would later describe as the most complete human relationship he could imagine. When someone asked him to explain the friendship, he gave an answer that, five hundred years later, is still the sweetest, most inarticulate, most completely human thing you've ever heard: *because he was he, and I was I*. Anyone who has ever tried to explain why they adore someone and come up empty will recognize exactly what he's doing there. The moment you reach for the reason, you've already lost the thread.

La Boétie died of plague in 1563 and left a hole Montaigne spent the next thirty years writing around. Montaigne's essays are, among other things, a very long conversation with someone who'd stopped being available for conversation. Anyone who has lost a person they couldn't replace will recognize that project immediately.

I've been writing around this territory on BEEW for a while now. I keep arriving at the same place from different directions. Genuine connection doesn't need justifying or protecting. It just is. The problem is we keep mistaking the performed version for the real thing.

In *Like>Love* I wrote about my kids, about the specific luck of genuinely liking them and knowing they genuinely like me back. We love each other, of course, but the liking feels like the rarer, better thing to have. In some alternate version of our lives, one where I'm not their dad and they're not my kids, I think we'd still find each other. I'm certain of it. Some people just would. That's Montaigne's thing exactly, the friendship that can't be explained by circumstance or obligation or proximity, that would have happened anyway, in any life, under any conditions.

Montaigne had a line about this that I keep coming back to. 'If there is such a thing as a good marriage, it is because it resembles friendship rather than love.' We built an entire civilization around *love*, the songs and the movies and the holidays and the grand gestures, while *like*, the thing that actually makes you want to be around someone, barely gets a mention. The like in friendship is the thing. Love is almost beside the point.

What Montaigne understood is that this kind of friendship is about who you become inside it. The version of yourself that is only possible because of a specific other person. When La Boétie died, Montaigne lost that person, and the version of himself that had only existed in relation to him. When he finally reached for a word to describe what La Boétie had meant to him, he found one. *Everything*.

Sol LeWitt and Eva Hesse knew exactly what he meant. They met in New York in 1960, two young artists with almost nothing in common except everything that mattered. When Hesse was in Germany in 1965, creatively blocked and drowning in self-doubt, she wrote to LeWitt in despair. His response was five pages of profanity-laced clarity. *Stop thinking and just DO*. I wrote about that letter here, if you haven't read it. It's extraordinary.

After Hesse died of a brain tumor in 1970 at thirty-four, LeWitt, devastated and alone, created Wall Drawing #46, composed entirely of lines he described as 'not straight,' his clean geometric world, bent by grief. There is something almost unbearably gentle about a man whose entire life was devoted to precision allowing himself, just this once, to go crooked. Montaigne would have recognized it instantly. He spent thirty years in his tower after La Boétie died doing the same thing with language, turning over the same questions with the same person who could no longer answer, letting the thinking go wherever grief took it. What the world received as philosophy, Montaigne experienced as company.

Two men, centuries apart, still talking to someone who couldn't talk back. That's what real friendships do. They don't end. They just change shape.

The only honest monument to this kind of friendship looks exactly like that, a little crooked, a little unfinished, stubbornly ongoing. If you've had one of these friendships you already know this. If you haven't, I'm not sure I can explain it. Montaigne couldn't either. That was rather his point.

Because it was him. Because it was you.

Essay Two: Post-Traumatic Growth

> *He who fears he shall suffer, already suffers what he fears.*
> —Michel de Montaigne

Montaigne's position on suffering is not one that moves units in the self-help aisle. He doesn't promise the darkness was worth it. He doesn't offer a reframe or a silver lining or a path to emerging stronger. His actual claim is simpler and harder at the same time. *Loss restructures you.* Some of what it builds is real. Some of what it costs doesn't come back. He doesn't tidy this up because it doesn't tidy up.

I know this from the inside. The years 2015 to 2023 were what I'd describe, with considerable understatement, as a sustained catastrophe, the kind that accumulates until one day you look up and barely recognize your life. I've written around the edges of this, particularly, in two letters to a friend on the sudden passing of her husband (here and here), and more directly in *A Path Through the Dark Forest*. Circling back through it all, what I keep finding is that what gets you through darkness is rarely what the inspirational literature promises.

I came out the other side changed. Of course I did. Some of what changed is genuinely better, and plenty of the cost still costs. I've looked for the clean arc in my own experience, the triumphant emergence with the satisfying resolution, and while there's a lot there it's anything but clean. What I find instead is something closer to Montaigne. A person who went through something, came out the other side having learned more

about himself in those years than in all the decades before them, and who met a different version of himself waiting there, one he wasn't expecting and couldn't have predicted, and who is, on balance, grateful for the introduction.

There's a companion line of his I keep returning to: "There were many terrible things in my life and most of them never happened." Mark Twain said something similar. Coming from a man who lived through the French Wars of Religion, lost his closest friend young, buried five of his six children, and spent his final years in chronic physical pain, this is a precise and hard-won observation about anticipatory dread, the suffering you manufacture before the event, which he understood to be its own category of torment entirely separate from the suffering that actually arrives.

The psychologist Richard Tedeschi spent decades documenting what he called *post-traumatic growth*, the real phenomenon in which some people who survive serious trauma report better relationships, greater resilience, clearer priorities. His research is careful about the word "*some*." Trauma reliably produces suffering. But in some people, under some conditions, with some support, it additionally produces growth.

Later, his work was misused by a wellness industry eager to turn trauma into a growth strategy, as if the correct emotional response to pain and loss is only ever gratitude. I wrote about my own discomfort with this idea in *Proofs of Wonder*, where the calls for gratitude as an antidote to agonizing life experiences felt too white-washed and tidy for what the experience actually was. Tedeschi has been correcting for this conflation ever since, noting that survivors who reported growth were simply people who'd been through something terrible and were surprised to find themselves still standing. Montaigne would have understood that immediately. He'd have called it the oldest confusion in the world, and he'd have been right, because people were doing it long before anyone was selling it. There's a meaningful distance between surviving something and being glad it happened. Montaigne wasn't interested in any of that.

The ground he had in mind was death itself. 'To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave,' a sentence that sounds almost reckless until you sit with it long enough to understand what he actually means. The freedom he's pointing at belongs to the person who has genuinely reckoned with loss, who has looked at it directly rather than from behind the comfortable

assumption that it is always happening to someone else. That person moves through the world differently. They are, by necessity, less defended, more awake, and harder to fool.

The dark forest years gave me all three, at considerable cost. I'd have preferred a cheaper education.

But here we are.

Essay Three: Shame & the Admission That Costs Something

> *I speak the truth, not so much as I would, but as much as I dare; and I dare a little more as I grow older.*
> —Michel de Montaigne

Of Experience is the last essay Montaigne ever wrote, a chapter in which he becomes a teacher and sage advisor recommending how to live, drawing entirely from his own appetites, ailments, and negotiations with physical decline as the only evidence he trusts. His position was that the self, examined honestly and completely, was the only subject a writer could treat with real authority, and that real authority required including what you'd most prefer to omit.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau disagreed. He was, by the 1760s, one of the most famous and controversial thinkers in Europe, his books banned in Paris, himself in exile, and deeply convinced that history was misunderstanding him. *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* was his correction of the record. In it he called Montaigne's honesty a performance, writing that Montaigne took great care to confess only faults his readers would find endearing while insisting his own confessions were exhaustive, unfiltered, and nakedly honest. Readers who spend time with both writers tend to reach the opposite conclusion. Rousseau couldn't question his own righteousness for a single

paragraph. Montaigne, playing with his cat, once asked: 'When I play with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me rather than I with her?' That capacity to step outside your own skull, even briefly, even absurdly, is the whole difference.

The courageous move in writing is the admission that costs something. You walk through the shame of it, or the piece doesn't work. I've been trying to do exactly that on this blog, with varying degrees of success. Montaigne's argument about writing is that the shameful material isn't optional decoration. The actual embarrassing truth of what you did and thought and wanted matters because excluding it turns everything else into a lie.

The essays that generated the deepest, most pointed responses were, without exception, the ones where I put something on the table I'd have preferred to keep off it. My drug addiction. The loss of my brother. The years in the *dark forest* that I've still not fully faced on the page. Every time I tried to gesture at shameful parts from a safe distance, the reader could feel me managing a process. The writing goes flat. The sentences that almost say it and then don't are the sentences that kill the piece. I'm still trying.

The epigraph above—'*I dare a little more as I grow older*'—is my favorite thing Montaigne ever wrote about writing, and that's a competitive field. He was fifty-nine when he added it, finishing the last revisions to the *Essays* in the year he died. His daring grows as his time shortens. That's something worth sitting with for writers at any age. The distance between what you'd say and what you dare to say is not fixed. It shrinks if you keep working.

What's strange is that our current culture has made honest self-disclosure simultaneously more available and more impossible. Available because the infrastructure now reaches anyone with a phone and something to say. More impossible because that same infrastructure produced an economy of performed vulnerability, which wears the same clothes as honesty while being its precise opposite.

Montaigne's test is simpler and more brutal than anything the content economy offers. Does this make you look bad? Not sad or bravely struggling or admirably raw. Actually bad. If you can write that thing and still come out seeming admirable, you haven't found the door yet.

Rousseau published *The Confessions* in 1782 and announced it as the most honest self-portrait ever written, a book that would show a man exactly as he was, nothing softened. He then included, in full, his abandonment of all five of his children to a foundling hospital, his petty thefts, his sexual peculiarities, his paranoia, his episode of exposing himself to women in Turin as a young man. Damning enough? Except that's not actually the problem. According to most literary historians, Rousseau partly fabricated his story, though not in the places you'd expect. He didn't lie about the shameful parts. He lied about the flattering ones, inflating his sensitivity, his importance, his unique capacity for suffering. The shame went in honestly. The ordinary didn't. Underneath all those confessions, this was still a man still running a sophisticated vanity operation.

Montaigne would have found this the most interesting kind of failure, one so committed to his own darkness he couldn't see how much ego was still directing the whole production. The door was open. Rousseau walked through it and stopped halfway.

Essay Four: Wandering & the Case for Wasted Time

> *My art and profession is to live.*
> —Michel de Montaigne

Twenty years ago neuroscientists identified a network of brain regions that activates when you stop paying directed attention to anything. They called it the *default mode network*, a deliberately boring name for a genuinely extraordinary feat of evolution. This network runs during daydreaming, mind-wandering, and unfocused rest. It handles creativity, social cognition, self-reflection, and the integration of complex experience. It is, in other words, the most important cognitive mode available to you, and the only thing it asks is that you leave it alone. The productivity culture has spent thirty years making that increasingly difficult to do.

Montaigne's claim, writing in sixteenth-century France without the vocabulary to explain any of this, was that the time that looks wasted from the outside is doing something the directed, outcome-optimized hours cannot do. The *Essays* exist because he spent years following his thinking wherever it went without demanding it arrive anywhere in particular. He was, without knowing it, one of the earliest and most eloquent defenders of a cognitive process that wouldn't be formally identified for another five centuries.

Composting works the same way. You throw things in like experiences, reading, grief, half-formed ideas, conversations that didn't go anywhere, books you can't explain why you picked up. Then you leave it alone. The decomposition that produces anything worth having requires time and push-back and darkness and no interference. Every productivity hack is someone opening the bin every twenty minutes to check if it's done yet. It isn't. It won't be. Doesn't work like that.

I wrote a version of this in *The Ride Is All There Is*, though from a different angle, more about presence and destination than productivity and guilt. The guilt is what I haven't written about, and it's its own species. The guilt of someone who knows they do their best thinking while apparently doing nothing, who has watched the wandering produce the best of whatever they make, and who still can't quite shake the feeling they're getting away with something. I know exactly where that feeling comes from. I've spent decades building things, running things, answering to the logic that time is a resource and resources need to justify themselves.

That mind wants to know what the time was used for. It wants accountability. A deliverable. Every hour needs to point somewhere and produce something. I've been suspicious of that demand long enough to notice what it misses, but suspicion and being free of it are different things, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. What I know with more certainty, from the inside, is what happens when the default mode network stops working altogether

The first thing depression disrupts is the wandering. The thinking never stops. It ran constantly through the dark forest years, churning away with all the weight and texture of productive thought, and produced nothing useful at all. Depressive rumination is a

broken version of wandering, all the machinery running, none of the generative quality that makes any of it worth anything. The compost bin, spinning endlessly, producing heat and no compost.

What the depression took, before it took nearly everything else, was the ability to wander without the wandering curdling. Every digression became a loop. Every unfocused hour became evidence. The mind that should have been quietly integrating experience was instead cataloguing damage with the diligence of an auditor who only ever finds deficits.

It came back slowly. One of the first signs it was coming back, I noticed in retrospect, was when I could pick up a book for no particular reason and put it down two hours later having been imperceptibly, invisibly reorganized by the encounter.

Montaigne wrote that 'when I am attacked by gloomy thoughts, nothing helps me so much as running to my books. They quickly absorb me and banish the clouds from my mind.' Books as medicine. He said this as a practical observation about his own mind, the way someone might note that walking helps when they can't sleep. He was reporting what worked, and what worked was giving the default mode network something to process and then leaving it alone. He just didn't have those words for it.

The entrepreneurial mind I described earlier, the one that wants deliverables and justifications and hours that point somewhere, runs on a simple equation where time produces outputs and outputs justify the time. The default mode network not only doesn't operate on this logic, it cannot be persuaded to. You can't schedule a revelation. You can't time-block the moment two things you've been carrying separately suddenly become one thing you didn't know you needed. That resolution happens in the wandering. It happens in the tower. It happens, if you're lucky and patient and willing to look unproductive for long enough, in the afternoon that produced nothing you could point to.

That epigraph—'*my art and profession is to live*'—sounds almost passive until you understand what Montaigne meant by *living*. He meant the reading without purpose, the thinking without agenda, the conversation that goes nowhere, the afternoon with

the cat, the slow and necessary composting of everything that had happened to him into something he could use. That kind of living requires the attention most people spend their whole lives trying to outsource.

The distance between what we call productive and what is actually generative is one of the great unexamined frauds of modern working life. An entire industry was built on the wrong answer to the wrong question, selling systems and tactics for optimizing hours that should never have been optimized in the first place. For a long time I was deep in that race, collecting and displaying and competing and moving fast enough that everything outside the track was a blur. I was good at it. I was also a *missing person* inside my own life.

The blinders that come with that particular game are total. There is no learning there, no real knowledge of yourself or anyone around you, just the scoreboard and the next thing on it. It took years of loss and illness and the slow collapse of everything I'd built to show me that the scoreboard was never real and the game was never zero-sum and the accumulation I'd been so proud of was mostly just noise. People ask if I'd go back. I would.. not. Not for most of it, at least. What the dark forest years gave me goes all the way down, past the applause and the rooms and the frantic collecting of things that made me feel bigger and other people feel lesser, to the bottom, where the only person left to impress was myself.

Montaigne had a word for what I found down there. *Living*.

Essay Five: Belonging to Yourself

> *The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.*
> —Michel de Montaigne

Most people spend their lives belonging to everything except themselves. Their work, their reputation, their family's expectations, their terror of what other people think. Montaigne wrote about this his whole life, with increasing urgency as the years went on, and arrived at a position that sounds simple and isn't. The most important thing a person can do is keep returning to themselves. Not once, as a revelation, but over and over, as a practice.

That observation looks different at different ages, and not in the way you'd expect. At twenty-five you haven't lived enough to know it yet. At fifty-five, after years of giving yourself away in ways you didn't notice until the bill arrived, it feels less like a principle and more like a reckoning with lost time. And with that reckoning comes something close to panic, a sudden urgency to recover ground you didn't know you'd been losing.

Part of what makes that panic so disorienting is that most people, by their fifties, believe they know themselves reasonably well. They don't. What they know is the version of themselves that has been useful to other people, shaped by obligation and performance and the steady pressure of other people's needs. Montaigne draws a distinction that cuts right through this. *Belonging* to yourself is not the same as *knowing* yourself. Knowing yourself is an investigation project with findings. Belonging to yourself is a practice, a daily decision to inhabit your own experience rather than administer it. Montaigne thought this was the most ordinary and important work a person could do with their time alive.

I wrote about this early on. *Soon We'll Have Nothing Left to Give Away of Ourselves* is an indictment of the attention economy and what we've let it do to our capacity to belong to ourselves. What gets eroded isn't attention exactly, though that too, but our interior life where our experience actually processes into something usable. That erosion reaches further than you'd expect, into your relationships, your judgment, your ability to distinguish what you actually want from what you've been optimized to want. You trade presence for the simulation of presence and don't notice the difference until you go to reach for yourself and find the cupboard bare.

Montaigne wrote about this constantly. The courtier who performs a self so thoroughly, for so long, that the performance becomes the only self available. He considered this the worst thing that could happen to a person, a kind of slavery, and wrote about the

capacity to be alone with yourself without the mirror of other people's regard as a prerequisite for everything else worth having.

Five centuries later, a psychologist named James Pennebaker put the examined life under clinical conditions, asking 46 healthy undergraduates to write for fifteen minutes a day over four consecutive days about the most stressful or traumatic experiences of their lives. The control group wrote about neutral topics. Those who wrote about genuine difficulty reported better immune functioning, improved mood, and fewer visits to health centers in the six months that followed. The study was published in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology. Researchers have been replicating and extending it ever since, across populations, languages, and conditions, producing over a thousand published studies in forty years.

The *Pennebaker effect* keeps showing up. Something about the practice of being a reliable witness to your own experience, wrestling it onto the page rather than just transcribing it, being honest enough to get the shape of it right, helps in ways that still resist clean explanation. Montaigne would not have been surprised. That practice, sitting down, paying careful attention to what actually happened and what you actually felt, is probably the most direct version of what he meant by belonging to yourself.

Which is exactly where his other line on this lands: 'I do not care so much what I am to others as I care what I am to myself.' In an era that has made the performance of selfhood the primary unit of public identity, that sentence cuts differently depending on what you do with it. The culture of social media self-narration inherited the impulse and used it almost exclusively as cover for self-promotion dressed as self-examination.

Montaigne used it as a standard of honesty, the test of which is whether the self-examination is honest enough to cost you something. If it isn't, you're not examining yourself. You're performing yourself, which is the thing he spent his whole life arguing against.

I know these costs because I've paid them. The years that went wrong for me, the ones I've written about from a dozen directions on this blog, felt like being slowly taken apart with no promise of reassembly. If there is a return to myself, and I'll let you know when