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FEATURES

My Father, Montaigne, and the Art of Living

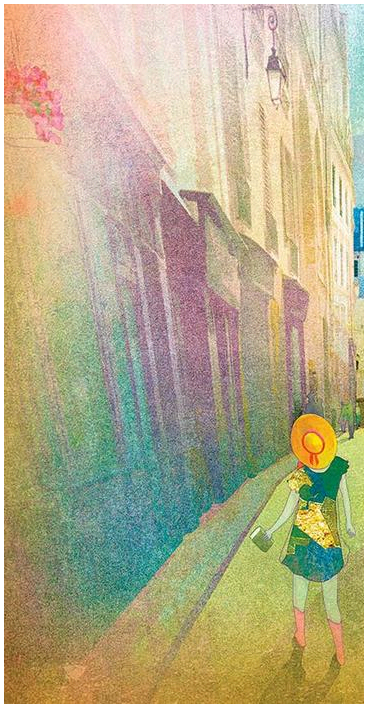

Illustration: Michael Woloschinow

By Ann Tashi Slater '84
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WHENEVER I'M IN PARIS, I visit the place on the Left Bank where my father lived while studying abroad in the 1950s. A philosophy student at the Sorbonne, he rented a room on Rue Monsieur le Prince, a street off Boulevard Saint-Michel filled with Japanese and Vietnamese restaurants, bookstores, and hotels. Standing in front of my father's building, I imagine him walking through the tall green doors on his way to a lecture on Socrates or Descartes, wearing his trademark button-down shirt and narrow tie. Sometimes, like my father used to, I stroll to the nearby Jardin du Luxembourg to watch children sail toy boats in the fountain and stylish couples dance to the bandstand orchestra; then I stop in at Café Le Rostand for an espresso. Eventually, I walk down the Boulevard Saint-Michel towards the Seine. Partway along, if you turn right on Rue des Écoles, is a bronze statue of 16th-century philosopher Michel de Montaigne, facing the Sorbonne.

Author of *Essais* (1580), a three-volume collection of musings on topics ranging from thumbs to cannibals to imagination, Montaigne was the first to use the term "essay" for short exploratory pieces like the ones he wrote. The statue shows him leaning forward with an affable expression; his legs are crossed and one shoe has been burnished gold by students who rub it for good luck before exams. My father, not one for superstition, wouldn't have touched the shoe (Montaigne, not a fan of superstition, probably wouldn't have, either), but — headed for class or a visit to the secondhand booksellers along the Seine — he surely took pleasure in seeing one of his heroes.

Perhaps it was at the nearby J. Vrin Philosophy Bookstore that my father bought his copy of *Essais*, the 1950 Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition of 1,257 pages plus bibliographic notes. When he died in 2012, I inherited this well-read tome. Half of the gold-lettered brown spine was missing and had been replaced with tape. As he did for the books that mattered most to him — from Montaigne to Michelet, Voltaire to Pascal — on the inside cover, my father had written his name and address in green ink; on the title page, he'd signed his name with a flourish and applied his personal stamp: *Library of . . .*

I keep *Essais* next to my desk here in Tokyo. Sometimes I pick it up to breathe in the leather-binding-and-old-paper smell, which returns me to the San Francisco apartment where my father lived and practiced psychiatry after my parents divorced when I was 11. On visits, if my father was seeing clients in the front room, I'd hang out in the back, perusing the books crowded onto the shelves and piled on the floor. The back room, where my father read and ruminated and slept, was what Montaigne called an "arrière boutique," a "room at the back of the shop" in which one feels free. In his essay "On Solitude," Montaigne writes, "We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop . . . establishing there our true liberty . . .." His arrière boutique was the library he created in a circular stone tower at the family château in 1570, when he retired from legal work at the Parliament of Bordeaux. Mine is my study, a space that, like my father's back room and Montaigne's library, has many

books and, like Montaigne's library, is furnished with objects inherited from family and collected on my travels that inspire me.

In my father's copy of *Essais*, some pages are flagged with the Post-its he kept handy while reading: "De juger de la mort d'autruy" ("On judging someone else's death"), "De l'utile et de l'honneste" ("On the useful and the honourable"), "Des coches" ("On coaches"). I turn to "De l'art de conférer" ("On the art of conversation"), an essay that was no doubt one of my father's favorites. Montaigne writes: "To my taste the most fruitful and most natural exercise of our minds is conversation. I find the practice of it the most delightful activity in our lives." This is a sentiment my father expressed in one way or another, in word and deed, throughout his 80 years.

Leafing through the essay now, I'm reminded of the many conversations we had at his Twin Peaks apartment. We would talk, sometimes until the first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky, the Bay Bridge glittering like a half-submerged bracelet. Those quiet hours spent in conversation started when I was a small girl, before the divorce; I especially remember the time we shared on our family's cross-country journeys (I've been on 13 car trips across America). My father loved driving at night and I'd ride shotgun, my mother and brother and sisters asleep in the back of our yellow microbus. It was just me and my dad in an Edward Hopper-ish nightscape of long-haul trucks and roadside diners, my father's face lit by the glowing dashboard as the miles and hours flowed past.

From my father, I learned about conversation as exploratory. He'd embark on a conversation in the same way he pulled out of the driveway (well after dark) as we set off across America: unburdened by time constraints, open to whatever might be experienced, ready to exit the highway onto roads that looked interesting. I don't recall what we talked about on our cross-country trips, but later, starting when I was in my teens and visited him at his apartment, we discussed interpersonal politics and people we knew, my friendships and school life, music and the natural world. A man of wide-ranging knowledge and passions, my father talked about mind games and the dangers of conventional wisdom; introduced me to Bach and Soler, to the alegrías flamenco that originated in my birthplace of Cádiz in Andalusia; told me about scientific facts he found fascinating (if you combined a quart of water and a quart of alcohol, about 10 percent of the volume was lost because of how the molecules fit together), and phenomena in nature he found unforgettably lovely, like the fireflies he'd seen blinking in synchrony across the countryside one night in India. He spoke and listened thoughtfully and with full attention, immersed in the exercise of mind Montaigne so reveled in.

Much of what my father and I shared related to our French connection. Captivated by his stories about Paris, I started studying French in sixth grade. He surprised me one day with my own copy of Assimil's self-study *French Without Toil*, which he'd inscribed with "de la part de papa" ("from Papa") and covered expertly with clear contact paper for protection. Looking through the book now, I find a piece of notepaper with the grammar exercises I did for Lesson 13, "Une visite pour papa." In my young girl's loopy scrawl, I wrote: *un papa, le papa, mon papa* ("a papa," "the papa," "my papa"). This had extra-special meaning for me since, in keeping with his Francophilia, my father had me and my siblings call him "Papa" rather than "Dad."

After high school, I worked for a year in Paris and, like my father, fell in love with France. Short on money and time after the divorce, my father no longer took vacations, but he came to see me, striding joyfully off the plane at Orly Airport early on a June morning. Back for the first visit in almost 30 years, he plunged once again into the streets where he'd been a young man caught up in the heady, intellectual fervor of the city of Sartre and Camus, worlds away from his small-town New Jersey upbringing. We lingered in cafés and bookshops, went to plays and concerts and museums. He looked up his old girlfriend, a leggy blonde French woman he'd met at a party during his year abroad; in the used car I'd bought, the three of us headed down to her family's ancestral home in Provence. When my father and I returned to Paris, we naturally left late in the day, twilight falling over the lavender fields as we settled in for hours of conversation on the drive north.

> In time, though, I've found my father is still very much with me. Like our far-ranging conversations, what we shared keeps expanding onto new roads, fresh thoughts and perspectives, as I test and weigh and consider, in dialogue with myself and others.

Before my father flew back to San Francisco, we had dinner at a Right Bank brasserie with a French couple I knew. We were discussing how I'd ended up coming to France, and my father exclaimed, "On verra si elle devient Francophile comme moi!" (*We'll see if she becomes a Francophile like me!*). More than anything, I think, he hoped I would come to love conversation as the French did, to savor long meals, leisurely café conversations, late-night talks; to adore it as Montaigne did, relishing intellectual exchange and sparring that wasn't to be taken personally but as an inspiration to ever-deeper questioning of one's own and others' beliefs, in line with the skepticism Montaigne expressed in his famous motto, "Que sais-je?" (*What do I know?*). It isn't surprising my father became a psychiatrist. My mother said he preferred talking about life instead of living it. But for him, conversation as a means of examining the self, as an essential part of the inquiry into what it means to be human, was the epitome of a life well-lived. He believed in such learning as a lifelong endeavor and agreed wholeheartedly with

Montaigne that “conversation provides teaching and exercise all at once” and “our mind is strengthened by contact with vigorous and well-ordered minds.”

My father and I enjoyed an ongoing conversation until his death almost 10 years ago in Napa, California. He’d fallen into a coma and the doctors didn’t think I’d make it in time from Tokyo to say goodbye. I asked my sister to tell him I was on my way; as I rushed out the door to the airport, I grabbed the latest issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*, which I’d bought earlier in the week to send him as usual.

When I arrived at Queen of the Valley Medical Center, my father was still unconscious but alive. He’d waited for me, as I’d known he would. Sepsis had set in, his doctors told us, and they could do nothing more. Yet the monitor next to the night table beeped, the peaks and valleys of my father’s heartbeat on the screen reassuringly rhythmic, if spaced further and further apart as the minutes passed. Afternoon sunshine spilled through the window, illuminating me, my sisters, my father’s best friend of almost 50 years, as we stood in a circle around the bed.

I took *Le Monde diplomatique* from my bag and began reading to my father. It was his favorite publication and he looked forward to it every month. He couldn’t see, he couldn’t fold me in a bear hug and say, “What’s new with you?” but I was certain he could hear me, because hearing was the last sense to go. Now he would wake up, as he heard about *l’arabe, une “langue de France” sacrifiée* and *les révolutions de Rousseau*. He’d open his eyes and we’d talk: Why was Arabic, France’s second most common language, not being taught more in French secondary schools? How had the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau influenced revolutions in Latin America and Asia, not to mention the U.S.? Rousseau’s tomb was in the Panthéon, my father would tell me; he’d visited it on a rainy spring afternoon after class and then met his girlfriend for an apéro at Café Le Rostand. I’d tell him about the friend I’d had coffee with at the Rostand when I was last in Paris, how she was raising five children while working as an editor, and he’d ask how we’d met and what she was like, what I thought about the status of women in French society; we’d speculate on how things might change since Hollande had defeated Sarkozy in the recent presidential election.

But my father didn’t wake, and less than an hour after I arrived, he passed away.

One of these days, I’ll visit the tower near Bordeaux where Montaigne began writing *Essais*. My father stopped there during a summer spent traveling with his girlfriend, her mother, and her mother’s boyfriend. In Montaigne’s tranquil library, I’ll see my father and his girlfriend gazing up at the inscriptions Montaigne painted on the wooden ceiling beams for inspiration; his girlfriend’s mother — who disliked my father because of his penchant for questioning his elders — will be standing off by the window, looking out at the surrounding fields and forests with her lover.

Among the phrases Montaigne inscribed on the beams is *“Summum nec metuas diem, nec optes”* (“Neither be afraid of your last day nor desire it”; he also included this in Chapter 37, Book II, of *Essais*, “On the resemblance of children to their fathers”). As a philosopher and a physician, my father wasn’t afraid of dying; if anything, he feared coming to the end of his life not having lived. Though he didn’t fear death, I was deeply afraid of losing him. The evening after he died, I felt his presence in the earth and the sky — the vineyards evanescing in the violet dusk, the autumn moon rising over the mountains to the east — but the next day, I could no longer feel him, and anguish set in as I realized I would not see him again.

In time, though, I’ve found my father is still very much with me. Like our far-ranging conversations, what we shared keeps expanding onto new roads, fresh thoughts and perspectives, as I test and weigh and consider, in dialogue with myself and others. I told him once that I’d be sad forever when he was gone, and he exclaimed with a laugh, “Oh no, don’t be!” I wanted more time, more days together, more conversations. He didn’t want more, he just wanted to make the most of whatever time he had, and the way he chose to do that has been a lesson for me in how to live.

One afternoon while writing this essay, I look up my father’s Rue Monsieur le Prince building on Google Maps. A few doors down is the PUF (Presses universitaires de France; University Press of France) bookstore; to my delight, “Que sais-je?” is written on the window, advertising an eponymous PUF series of short books that investigate subjects ranging from the Aztecs to Alzheimer’s, medieval philosophy to urbanism. My father would have been delighted as well.

Ann Tashi Slater ’84 recently finished a memoir about reconnecting with her Tibetan roots. Her work has been published by The New Yorker, The Paris Review, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Guernica, among others. This essay, about Slater’s father, John S. Davis Jr. ’53, first appeared in the online magazine Catapult. For more, visit www.anntashislater.com.

Photo: Barry Sutton

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1984 ESSAY

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