

Montaigne On Practice
Chapter 6, Book II

[Full Text Online](#) (different translation from what I used)

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/montaigne/michel/essays/book2.6.html>

In this chapter, Montaigne reflects on a nearly fatal horseback riding accident that led him to lose the philosophic fear of the act of dying that had obsessed him and so many others before him. The following are some excerpts.

Practice is of no help in the greatest task we have to perform: dying.

We can by habit and practice strengthen ourselves against pain, shame, dire poverty and other occurrences: but as for dying we can only assay that once; we are all apprentices when it comes to such things.

In ancient days men assayed and savored their own death: they've bent their minds on discovering what the crossing-over really was: but none have not come back to tell us about it.

Montaigne surmises that we have some means of breaking ourselves in for death and to some extent of making a study of it. We can have experience of it, not whole and complete but at least such as not to be useless and to make us more strong and steadfast. If we cannot join battle with death we can advance towards it; we can make reconnaissance and if we cannot drive right up to its stronghold we can at least glimpse it and explore the approaches to it.

Those who have fallen into a swoon after some violent accident and have lost all sensation, have been in my opinion very close to seeing Death's true and natural face, for it is not to be feared that the fleeting moment at which we pass away comports any hardship or distress, since we cannot have sensation without duration. What we have to fear is Death's approaches.

Many things appear greater in thoughts than in fact. I have spent a large part of my life in perfect good health. For this reason when I came to experience the proximity to death I found its stabbing pains to be mild and weak compared with my fears.

If I am sheltered and warm in a pleasant room during a night of storm and tempest, I am dumb-struck with affliction for those then caught out in the open; yet when I am out there myself I never even want to be anywhere else. It may be the same with death that in the abstract it is frightening but when one faces it in extremis, it is less threatening.

He goes on to discuss a riding accident that left him comatose for couple of hours.

The memory of this event was deeply planted in his soul and painted for him the face of death and her portrait so close to make sure that it sometimes reconciled him to her.

Shortly after emerging from a coma, he felt no affliction either for myself or for others; it was a kind of lassitude and sheer weakness without any pain. I saw my house but I did not recognize it. When they got me into bed, I experienced a feeling of infinite rest and comfort, It had been dreadful he was pulled about by those poor fellows who had taken the trouble to carry him in their arms over a long and very poor road.

The last thing I could recover was my memory of the accident itself; before I could grasp it I got them to repeat several times where I was going to, where I was coming from, what time it happened.

This long story of so light an accident would appear vain enough, were it not for the knowledge I have gained by it for my own use; for I do really find, that to get acquainted with death, needs no more but nearly to approach it. Everyone, as Pliny says, is a good doctrine to himself, provided he be capable of discovering himself near at hand. Here, this is not my doctrine, 'tis my study; and is not the lesson of another, but my own; and if I communicate it, it ought not to be ill taken, for that which is of use to me, may also, peradventure, be useful to another.

Montaigne recognizes that what helps him can perhaps help someone else. For many years the target of his thoughts had been himself alone. He examined nothing, he studied nothing, but himself. This reminds me of G. M. Hopkins poem [Spring and Fall](#). Montaigne feels that nothing is more difficult than the describing of oneself; and nothing, certainly, is more useful.

In this chapter, Montaigne tells us that we can only really learn about our own death, and by extension other serious concerns, from our personal experience. As he says, Socrates alone had taken a serious bite at his god's precept to "know himself" and by such a study had reached the point of despising himself, he alone was judged worthy of being called The Sage. If any man knows himself to be thus, let him boldly reveal himself by his own mouth.

This chapter is a personal account of one man's brush with death. It appears that close contact cured Montaigne of his fear of death. One wonders if this can be generalized and how frequently it applies to others. I certainly know of some cases of which this is true.