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Know yourself

Michel de Montaigne decided, in 1571, at the age of 38, to retire to his family home in the Dordogne, and spend most of his time in a garden tower room, lined with books. Weary of much of sixteenth century French life, he found solace in his books and in his horse riding, but what interested him most of all was himself – his thoughts, feelings, ideas and emotions. He was highly educated, and wrote down his thoughts each day, over a period of ten years, describing what it felt like to him to be angry, sad, confused, or doubting in faith. His large book, simply called 'Essays' is available today in many different languages, and though it is over 400 years old, it still comes across as very modern in tone.

Maybe it is because Montaigne doesn't care who he offends, and isn't writing to be a crowd-pleaser. He is interested in exploring what it means for him to be alive. Montaigne was a man who knew himself inside out, and could live with himself as a result. He didn't approve of all he did or thought, but he observed it, just like he observed his dog and cat's behaviour.

I've always been struck by Jesus' instruction to 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. To me, that says that if we don't know ourselves very well, or even at all, then it is hard, even impossible, to love another person. Healthy introspection never does anyone any harm. Like Montaigne, we can all observe ourselves at close quarters, and become more reflective about who we are, and why we do what we do. It might even do us – and our neighbours – a lot of good, if we were more familiar with our own characters and personalities.

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