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Growing Without Contempt for Your Earlier Self

Meaning and Direction

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Epigraph

> *I do not paint its being, I paint its passage*

Montaigne. Of Repentance, EssaysIII.2, clause within the opening paragraph beginning Even constancy. Charles Cotton translation, William Carew Hazlitt1877 edition.

What this article is about

Change can be described as if it first required rejecting the person you used to be. Earlier hopes become naivety, trust becomes weakness, and mistakes become proof of complete inadequacy. Yet revising a particular decision and despising an entire lived history require different grounds. This essay considers development through a precise relationship to the past: acknowledging an error, changing an action, and avoiding turning an earlier self into a stranger whom the present person may look down on. Montaigne, Epictetus, and the parable of two sons distinguish a changing portrait, the application of principles, and recognition of someone returning. Their philosophical and religious answers remain different. In our hypothetical story, a woman reads a notebook containing a life plan she has long since left behind. Respect for an earlier self requires neither excusing harm nor retaining mistaken beliefs or returning to relationships that have ended.

I. An Old Text Does Not Know What You Know Now

Imagine a woman finding a notebook she filled years ago. It contains a careful plan: enter a particular profession, start a family by a set age, and never again doubt the chosen path. Her life now looks different. She changed occupations, some relationships ended, and certainty about one correct sequence gave way to more cautious decisions. Reading, she smiles and then becomes irritated: how could she have written such things seriously? This is an invented scene for reflection, not a documented case. An old text has become an object of present reading. It was written before events now known to its reader. Forgetting that sequence makes later knowledge grounds for despising an earlier absence of knowledge.

Earlier ignorance does not make every decision innocent. Some information was available then and may have been ignored; other information arrived later or was incomprehensible in those conditions. These differences need consideration case by case. Her professional plan may contain a genuine error: she assumed colleagues’ recognition would automatically give her a

stable sense of belonging. Yet the notebook also contains interest in the work, willingness to learn, and a wish to support herself. A mistaken conclusion does not make all these elements deceptive. Naming them separately gives the past detail. An expectation can be revised without attaching one label such as “stupidity” to every line, which explains nothing about the choices made.

Later knowledge can appear to be entirely the present person’s achievement, as though they always possessed a capacity the earlier person failed to use. Some understanding nevertheless arrived through time, others’ explanations, attempts, and circumstances nobody chose as lessons. Received knowledge can be acknowledged without a story of permanent superiority. Our reader understands a particular occupation better because she actually practised it. This does not oblige her to be grateful for every difficulty or call every failed experience useful. She can distinguish what was learned from the price paid. Understanding does not retrospectively justify that price. It may matter today without proving that no other way of learning was possible.

One question can remain open when reading the notebook: what was actually possible to understand then? The answer may be incomplete. She cannot remember every conversation and circumstance; some motives are now guesses. “I do not know” can remain beside a clear present disagreement. Rejecting an old plan does not require reconstructing its entire origin. A general claim about the earlier person, however, requires more than present irritation. What remains unknown marks the limit of the account. A decision can change without claiming that one later perspective has explained a whole lived history. Respect can begin with that accuracy even when affection for the past is not yet available.

II. Describing a Person Through Time

At the opening of Of Repentance, BookIII, chapter2, Montaigne describes the changing subject of his own portrait. The essay neither promises an impeccable past nor establishes a modern theory of self-acceptance. Our scene raises a limited question about descriptive time: do words concern someone at a particular moment or claim to define them forever? “I want one correct path” records a former desire. It does not show that her entire life reduces to inability to tolerate uncertainty. A later wish to keep several possibilities does not make her someone who will never seek certainty again. Description becomes more accurate when it retains a moment, a subject, and known circumstances.

People often describe the past as a finished character: “That version of me always tried to please.” The notebook may have been written on a day when approval mattered particularly. Other days included resistance, independent decisions, and ordinary tiredness. “Always” erases differences and offers a convenient figure to dismiss in one gesture. Our reader can instead name an episode: she accepted an unwanted task because she feared disappointing a

colleague. The account need not be pleasant, but it contains an action and something that could change. She can consider what to do differently without inventing one motionless character for her entire earlier life.

Description through time does not release responsibility for an action. If she made a promise and failed to keep it, later change does not erase that promise. Responsibility nevertheless has a subject: something was said, another person relied on it, and the outcome differed. Acknowledgment or repair concerns that subject. Contempt adds another demand: the whole earlier person must be declared unworthy. This says nothing about what to do with the promise and may displace conversation about an actual consequence. Our reader can acknowledge the breach, examine conditions, and state what will change in future agreements separately. These actions require neither complete justification of the past nor a sweeping verdict against it.

Montaigne retains moral distinctions; change does not become permission for every action. His portrait cannot supply an easy answer that “I was different then, so it no longer concerns me.” Our story concerns the same person acknowledging an earlier action and a changed relationship to it. Biographical continuity does not require keeping the old belief. It prevents a changed belief from being presented as the disappearance of every connection to what was done. This matters both for self-respect and for respect toward others. They may remember consequences even when someone no longer uses an earlier self-description. A new account does not oblige them to forget.

III. Revision Has a Particular Subject

“I used to be worse” can mean several things. She may have understood work less well, known less about her capacity, agreed without clarification more often, or genuinely acted unfairly. One comparison of present and past versions cannot settle these differences. Her notebook contains a definite rule: “A good colleague never refuses.” She now finds it inadequate. It ignores time, the capacity to fulfil a promise, and another person’s right to an honest answer. Revision concerns the rule; it does not require declaring every earlier concern for others false. Care can remain while agreements change. Development then has content visible in the next conversation, rather than only in a severe label attached to an earlier self.

A definite subject also helps when an error was not wrongdoing. She may have chosen an occupation that later stopped fitting. That does not establish dishonesty or an obligation to have predicted her whole future. A decision may have answered earlier interests while new circumstances make continuation unsuitable. Ignoring a known condition can be named separately. Later in Of Repentance, Montaigne considers earlier judgment within its circumstances, distinguishing it from an eventual outcome. Our extension concerns the

grounds available for a decision. It neither proves that every failure is chance nor declares every past decision reasonable.

An actual breach requires attention to another person, not only to a present self-account. If she promised help and disappeared without warning, “I did not know how to do otherwise” does not conclude the matter. It may help explain it without describing the entire event. Someone waited, lost time, or was left with additional work. She can acknowledge a known consequence without demanding immediate forgiveness. Appropriate repair depends on the relationship; contact may be unwelcome or impossible. This essay imposes no duty to return. Respect for an earlier self can coexist with acknowledgment of an action. It should not make someone else’s consequences irrelevant for the sake of a convenient developmental story.

Revision sometimes concerns another person’s rule adopted too broadly. Her notebook requires usefulness whenever an opportunity arises. She now sees that usefulness without a named limit turned every request into an obligation. The rule can change without mocking the earlier wish to help. That wish had definite meaning: participation, attentiveness, support for an undertaking. A new form can preserve it without impossible promises. Development here is not a passage from a bad person to a good one. The relationship between intention, circumstances, and action changes. If the new arrangement is awkward or incomplete, it can also be clarified. A present rule need not be final to be more suitable today.

IV. Naming a Change Is Easier Than Making It

In Epictetus’s Enchiridion, LI in the displayed edition, applying a principle differs from demonstrating it. This is a Stoic distinction, not a modern method for personal history. It raises a definite question here: what changes in the next action? She may explain the old rule’s error persuasively and still promise more than she can do. A precise explanation helps without replacing a different agreement. In her next conversation she can first ask about scope and timing. That small step does not prove complete transformation. It shows revision acquiring a place in action rather than remaining only a new image of herself.

If change does not happen immediately, this does not mean the earlier person returned and won. That formula invents two complete characters, one supposed to destroy the other. Our story needs examination of the next promise: what was understood, where a decision was rushed, and what can now be clarified. She may initially agree again but warn about an impossible deadline sooner than previously. This is a partial change with definite content. It need not be declared a victory for all development or rejected as incomplete. Examining an action leaves room to continue without another sweeping verdict. Consequences remain: somebody may still need a different performer, despite the acknowledgment of inward work.

Montaigne’s adopted passage also distinguishes displayed repentance from changed conduct. Comparison with Epictetus is limited to words and action; their foundations differ. Contempt for an earlier self can become a convincing public gesture that changes no agreements. Someone declares their former self terrible, receives acknowledgment of the seriousness of change, then agrees again without clarification. A harsher account of the past will not settle that problem. One can return to the present action. This does not forbid discussing feelings; it distinguishes subjects. An account expresses a relationship to experience, while an agreement defines particular work. Neither needs to replace the other to create an impression of complete inward renewal.

Applying a new rule need not require continual harshness toward oneself. Epictetus proposes his own discipline; this essay does not transfer every instruction to our contemporary reader. A small adjustment sufficient for a particular conversation can leave other questions open. She might say, “I will answer tomorrow,” when an offer needs consideration. This guarantees no correct decision tomorrow, but provides time to examine conditions today. Circumstances may prevent a pause; that restriction deserves consideration rather than a judgment of insufficient development. Action depends on actual relationships and limitations. A small change matters through its fit with a situation, not through confirmation of a predetermined stage of maturity.

V. Keeping an Intention While Changing Its Form

Her earlier plan included a wish to be attentive and dependable. She now sees that she associated dependability with constant availability. That association can be rejected while retaining the wish to answer for promises. The past need not divide into everything false or everything correct. It contained an intention, a chosen form, and consequences of joining them. Some parts can continue; others need changing. Calling everything a mistake removes the distinction that prompted revision. A person is left needing to invent a self again without named grounds. Our reader can say something simpler: it still matters not to disappear without warning, but she will no longer prove dependability by accepting every request.

A retained intention does not make every earlier action good. A kindly wish can accompany an unwanted action. If she helped without being asked and intruded into somebody else’s decision, her present account of attentiveness does not cancel the intrusion. Intention and method can be distinguished without requiring the other person to accept her explanation as the final assessment. Self-respect need not depend on others agreeing with a favourable version of an event. She can acknowledge what is known and name a limit to future involvement. Someone else may need distance. One person’s development does not become compulsory grounds for another person’s closeness, even when a change has genuinely occurred.

What remains may be ordinary: a favourite book, a practical skill, an interest in language, or the ability to listen to a long account. These can survive changed beliefs. They need not be suspected simply because they accompanied an earlier mistake, or made proof that the mistake was necessary. She can keep reading a book she loved while working in an occupation she has left. This obliges no return and makes no memory entirely happy. The activity may simply still fit. Respect for an earlier self can take the form of continuing a definite living interest, without declaring that everything was right or ceremonially reconciling with every notebook page.

Some parts cannot currently be kept. Words may recall a difficult period; activities may require conditions no longer available. Respect for the past need not be proved by compulsory return. The notebook can be set aside, a book left closed, an interest acknowledged as ended. A pause is not contempt. It concerns the present capacity to approach a subject. Contempt turns that subject into grounds for general humiliation; a pause retains a boundary of participation. Our reader can choose one page without continuing. She need not complete the entire examination in an evening. Stopping reflection also belongs to present life and requires no separate justification through the usefulness of discussing the past.

VI. Recognition Does Not Cancel an Acknowledged Error

In Luke15:11–32, the younger son returns after losing his resources and acknowledges wrongdoing; his father meets him compassionately. This Christian parable gives return its own religious meaning. It predicts no real relative’s behaviour and imposes no reconciliation where contact is unsafe or unwanted. Our limited comparison asks whether recognition of a person can coexist with acknowledgment of an action. Reading the notebook, she can reject an earlier rule without reducing its author to complete unworthiness. This inward extension belongs to the essay. It is not presented as a psychological explanation of the Gospel episode.

Recognition of one’s own past can mean simple accuracy: she genuinely wanted that life, made an effort, and failed to understand certain things. These can coexist. Desire does not make the path compulsory; effort does not prove correctness; incomplete understanding does not erase effort. She can see the careful plan as an attempt to arrange life through means then available. The attempt was incomplete and some conclusions mistaken. Understanding its significance nevertheless involves naming the aspiration, not only the discovered defect. This requires neither tenderness nor self-forgiveness. It retains more information and allows a present decision without reducing an entire history to one error.

The parable also contains an elder son who questions events in relation to his years of service. That part should not disappear to produce an easy formula of universal acceptance. Other people may likewise have expectations that differ from our reader’s new account. A colleague remembers an unkept promise; somebody close remembers unanswered requests. They

cannot be required to recognize change immediately or confirm its completeness. Development concerns a present action; another person's testimony concerns their own experience. These subjects may remain different. Revising a life does not give authority over everyone else's memory. Recognition of one's own past cannot replace respect for others' room to describe their experience differently.

The comparison therefore ends with no instruction to forgive an earlier self. "Forgive" may not fit: an unsuitable occupation is not necessarily guilt, and another person's breach should not become one's own wrongdoing. Other words remain available: understand conditions, acknowledge an action, revise a rule, leave a question open. Harm she caused requires precise information; harm done to her does not require taking someone else's responsibility. This essay does not decide those situations for its reader. It retains distinctions a general story about a bad earlier version can erase. Continuation can remain possible even when the past hurts and the language of complete reconciliation is unavailable.

VII. Speaking of the Past Without Public Humiliation

Someone describing change to friends may find it easiest to caricature an earlier self. Listeners laugh at an old plan, and the storyteller feels that laughter confirms present freedom. The account may have a cost: living interests from the past become embarrassing, difficult to revisit without looking foolish again. Our reader can say that she previously tied life too rigidly to a schedule. She need not read every private page aloud or portray her earlier self as incapable of thought. The scope of an account remains hers to choose. Change requires no public demonstration of rupture, and new beliefs do not make a private notebook common property.

Humour is not inherently contempt. A detail can be funny without making a person an object of humiliation. Consider what becomes laughable and what remains possible afterwards. Smiling at certainty that all questions would be settled by thirty can coexist with seeing a wish for peace behind it. A joke requiring every former hope to be called pathetic loses accuracy. The boundary varies with the subject and relationship to listeners. She can stop an account when it no longer conveys what she wants to say. Other people's laughter does not oblige continuation or decide the meaning of her past on her behalf.

Superiority can also be directed at people still living similarly. She may now call precise life schedules mistaken. Others may use a deadline for a definite undertaking without making it answer every life question. Her change grants no access to their motives. An unsuitable arrangement for her does not establish an identical conclusion for everyone. Montaigne's adopted opening describes a particular person; our extension retains that limit. A decision and its grounds can be described without turning others into reminders of an inferior stage.

Respect for an earlier self helps here too: the past ceases to be a convenient measure for judging everyone who has not repeated the present choice.

When someone recalls her earlier words, she need not deny them to retain a present decision. She can acknowledge having said them and explain why she thinks differently. This guarantees no agreement. It avoids choosing between permanent loyalty to every earlier formula and renouncing the person who spoke it. Her changed view of deadlines has a reason: experience exposed conditions the plan overlooked. If grounds remain unclear, that too can be acknowledged. Revision does not depend on immediately writing a perfect story of change. What matters is not presenting uncertainty as knowledge or requiring someone else to deny every connection between earlier words and the present biography.

VIII. The Present Person Also Remains in Time

Respect for an earlier self involves acknowledging that the present position can change too. This does not make it useless. She may reject one comprehensive schedule today and later want a definite plan for a particular undertaking. That need not be regression; the subject and conditions may differ. Describing development as permanent liberation from every old form makes any resemblance suspicious. A new obligation appears: continually demonstrate difference. Our story benefits instead from naming what the present rule suits and where it ends. Later revision can continue attention to conditions without proving that all previous work on oneself was inauthentic.

The wish for recognition remains in time as well. She may read the notebook calmly one day and feel irritated on another. Neither response has to be false; circumstances and subjects may differ. Calm reading need not become a compulsory condition to achieve every time. Respect can retain a definite form amid changed feelings: avoid making one response a complete description, assigning unknown motives, or replacing repair of an actual consequence with general self-abasement. These limits can be held imperfectly and clarified. They do not form an examination granting the right to declare development permanently accomplished.

The notebook may not need rereading for the next action. Some decisions are clear without lengthy examination. She already knows she cannot accept additional work and can answer under present conditions. Respect for an earlier self creates no obligation to research a biography continually. The past can be considered when it clarifies a definite question and set aside when the subject is understood. Here the notebook offers one occasion for reflection, not a mandatory developmental instrument. It should not govern every future answer. Life includes actions that need no accompanying story of change or demonstration of difference from an earlier person.

Development without contempt remains a way of connecting times more accurately. The past contained wishes, conditions, decisions, and consequences; the present contains new information and room for different action. Neither must absorb the other. Present understanding does not empty the earlier person of meaning, and recognition of a life does not preserve every belief forever. Our reader closes the notebook after recording one revised rule about the next promise. She declares neither the past exhausted nor herself completely renewed. A definite decision to try under suitable conditions is enough. Respect keeps continuation beside accurate responsibility: a person can be seen through time without contempt becoming the required proof of change.

What this means in practice

If you want to consider an earlier decision, choose one episode rather than your entire life. Record what you wanted, what you knew, and what you did. Note information that arrived later separately. Where motives or conditions remain unknown, leave “I do not know”; present certainty need not fill the gap.

Then name what you are revising: a belief, an agreement, an expectation of an occupation, or an action with consequences for someone else. Distinguish a mistaken conclusion from an intention that still matters. An intention does not cancel consequences; a consequence does not explain an entire biography. If particular harm is involved, suitable action depends on circumstances. This exercise requires neither contact nor somebody else’s forgiveness.

Finally, formulate one small change in the next action, such as clarifying a deadline before promising or stating a limit before beginning. It need not prove permanent superiority over an earlier self; clarification may still be needed later. Something requiring no revision can also remain: an interest, skill, or way of caring that still fits.

This voluntary editorial exercise raises questions; it is not a validated psychological method. It may be stopped or omitted. It assigns no blame for harm done to you, requires no gratitude for hardship, and promises no disappearance of painful feelings. A clear present decision may be enough without reading old pages again.

Key quotation

> *Son, thou art ever with me*

Luke15:31, opening clause of the father’s address to the elder son. King James Version.

Connections between traditions

1. **A portrait in time and applying a principle: MontaigneIII.2, opening “Even constancy”; EpictetusLI in Higginson’s edition.** Montaigne describes a changing subject; Epictetus distinguishes application from demonstration. Their limited similarity concerns the insufficiency of a final verbal form: a portrait requires time, a principle action. The mechanism separates a label for an earlier version from a present deed. Here it permits revising a promise without judging the whole earlier person. The distinction remains: Montaigne proposes no Stoic progression, and Epictetus describes no contemporary examination of biography. The extension establishes no psychological outcome or duty to adopt every instruction from either work.

2. **Decision conditions and acknowledgment of an action: MontaigneIII.2, “I find that, in my former resolves” and the following paragraph; Luke15:17–21.** The essay considers judgment under earlier conditions; the returning son acknowledges wrongdoing. Their similarity is limited to speaking definitely about the past rather than applying one general character label. The mechanism retains available grounds beside actions and consequences. Here it distinguishes later knowledge from a supposed earlier duty to know while retaining acknowledgment of an actual breach. Montaigne’s account of an unforeseen outcome is not Christian confession. Comparison excuses no arbitrary choice and requires no return to actual relationships.

3. **Expressed repentance and changed conduct: MontaigneIII.2, “They act quite contrary” and “I find no quality”; both paragraphs of EpictetusLI.** Montaigne questions repentance without correction; Epictetus questions demonstration without application. Similarity concerns a gap between words and action. The mechanism asks whether a harsh portrait of the earlier self has displaced revision of an agreement. Here the next answer to a request matters alongside an image of profound renewal. The moral-religious examination and Stoic ordering of philosophical activities retain different grounds. This offers no empirical proof that accounts of feelings are useless and imposes no rigorous self-punishment.

4. **Ordinary life and recognition of someone returning: MontaigneIII.2, “I propose a life ordinary”; Luke15:20–24,28–32.** Montaigne makes private life a subject of examination; the parable includes recognition of the returning son and discussion with the elder. Their limited similarity is that one action’s outward outcome does not exhaust a person. The mechanism keeps recognition beside conduct and others’ memory. Here it supplies a language of respect without automatic justification. The boundary matters: autobiography is not a theological parable. A father’s reception predicts no relatives’ behaviour and obliges no harmed person to forgive, become close, or forget their experience.

5. **A desired ideal and definite work: MontaigneIII.2, “I imagine an infinite number” and “If to conceive and wish”; EpictetusLI’s priority of application.** Montaigne distinguishes imagining

more perfect action from strengthening a capacity; Epictetus attends to applying a principle. Similarity concerns an image of improvement not itself constituting action. The mechanism moves comparison of selves toward an available adjustment. Here clarifying a deadline can replace a demand continually to prove superiority. Montaigne’s account of repentance and Stoic discipline retain their differences. This establishes neither fixed personality nor universal stages of maturity, and promises no inevitable change in feeling from a small adjustment.

Primary sources

Only the listed passages are adopted. Russian quotations are United Wisdom’s translations from named English editions; French and Greek originals were not collated. English quotations retain Cotton and KJV, with both short fragments identified as clauses. Montaigne’s moral examination, Epictetus’s Stoic foundation, and Luke’s Christian parable remain distinct. The contemporary scene and exercise are editorial contributions.

• Montaigne. EssaysIII.2, Of Repentance: named opening paragraphs and passage on conduct, ideals, and earlier decisions. Charles Cotton, William Carew Hazlitt1877; Project Gutenberg3600.

• Epictetus. Enchiridion, LI in the displayed Higginson edition, often numbered52 elsewhere. Project Gutenberg45109.1948 introduction not adopted.

• Luke15:11–32, parable of two sons; adopted17–24 and28–32. King James Version, Bible Gateway;15:31 addresses the elder son.

Tags

development, earlier experience, self-respect, accuracy, responsibility, revision, biography, change, past, present, decision, promise, action, intention, consequences, knowledge, decision conditions, self-description, private life, consent, boundaries, memory, continuation, maturity, Montaigne, Epictetus, Gospel of Luke, repentance, recognition, parable

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