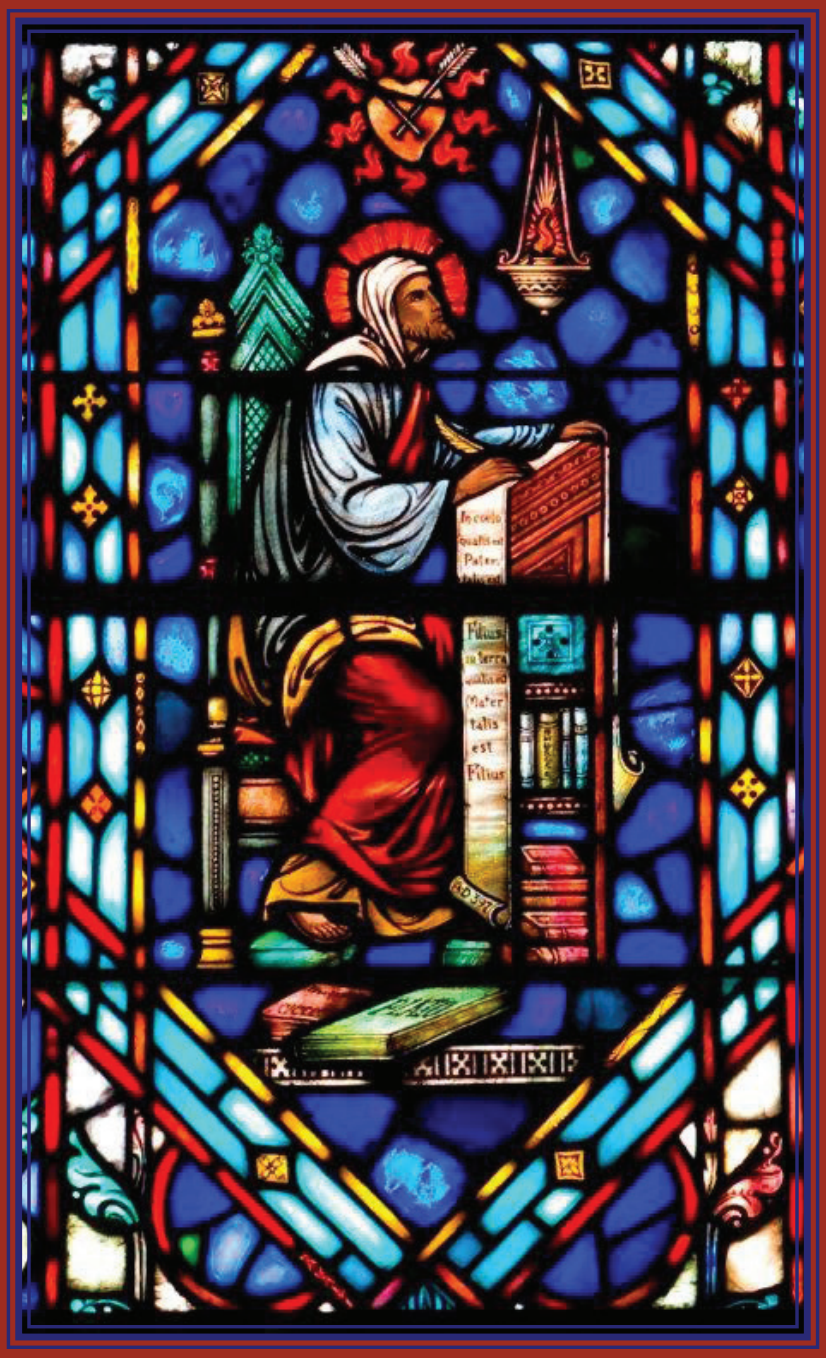
The Journey of a Restless Heart



A College Student's Guide to Augustine's *Confessions*

The Journey of a Restless Heart

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"You have made us for yourselves,
O God, and our hearts are restless
until they rest in You."
—*Confessions, 1.1.1*

The Journey of a Restless Heart—A College Student's Guide to Augustine's *Confessions*
Authored by Students of the Honors Interdisciplinary Humanities Seminar, Villanova University, Fall 2013

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The illustrations are from the stained glass windows depicting the life of St. Augustine, in the St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University.

Cover: St. Augustine writing confessions

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The Journey of a Restless Heart—
A College Student's Guide to St. Augustine's *Confessions*
Written for College Students, by College Students

Welcome to our web resource on St. Augustine's *Confessions.* We've listed a few questions you may be asking yourself.

Who was St. Augustine?

Augustine was born in North Africa in 354, converted to Christianity in 387, became a prominent bishop and author in the Roman Empire, and died in 430. His work is enormously influential in Western thinking, and his theology is foundational to both Catholicism and Protestantism. *Confessions*, his spiritual autobiography, is his most important work.

What this resource is not:	What it is:
. . . a scholarly discussion of Augustine	. . . written by college students, for college students to help you understand some of Augustine's thoughts and how they relate to the experiences of students today
. . . a biography or a book only about Augustine's ideas	. . . a discussion of eight incidents from Augustine's life as a way to introduce you to his life and some of his thoughts
. . . a religious book designed to convince you that Augustine's ideas are valid.	. . . a presentation of Augustine's life and thought in a way that will help you understand his ideas and think about them for yourself.

Who constructed this resource?

This resource was written by the students of the Interdisciplinary Honors Seminar at Villanova University. We are a group of academic and curious students who take six classes together during freshman year and two more during sophomore year. We are team-taught by teachers from varying disciplines. Our enriching environment, academic resources, and supportive community provide us with a unique and comprehensive opportunity to explore the classics of Western Civilization. This resource fulfills an assignment for the fall semester of our freshman year.

This project allowed us to delve further into our discussion of St. Augustine's theology and philosophy, and to relate that understanding in a way that suited a specific audience. We hope that by providing summaries of the important events in Augustine's life, analyses of these incidents, and comparisons to modern society, we can form a connection between a man who walked the earth nearly two thousand years ago and college students today.

Can I use this resource when I am writing a paper about Augustine?

Yes and no. Reading this resource will really help you understand Augustine, but please be careful in how you use our material. First, this isn't a scholarly source. We are freshman students, so don't cite us as though we are experts! Above all, be sure to cite our work properly, using the correct format for Internet sources. Just remember, if you use any of our quotations from Augustine, be sure to cite it as coming from *this* source, rather than making it appear that you are taking it from the book that we used. Check out what Yale University says about quoting from books you haven't seen yourself here. Here would be a sample citation:

> Augustine said he was "in love with loving" [qtd. in Villanova Honors Students, p. xx].

In your works cited page, you would list this text, using the standard format for Internet sources, listing "Villanova Honors Students" as the authors.

What text did we use?

Quotations are taken from St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Maria Boulding, O.S. B. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1997. Some of the quotations have been slightly altered to improve readability.

Infancy

"This is the way of infants"
(Conf. 3.6.8)

St. Augustine starts his *Confessions* (which is really long speech directed to God) by describing his life as a baby. Right away, that tells us something about what kind of book this is. He obviously doesn't really know anything about his thoughts or actions as a baby (he wrote this long after both parents died), but he uses his account to make a bigger point. We see this move over and over again in *Confessions*, when Augustine describes events – which may or may not have happened exactly as he says – in ways that are shaped to make a broader point about God and our own lives. Thus Augustine's discussions of his early life aren't really about what was going on in his crib in 354; they're about bigger themes: why our lives are sometimes so restless and unsatisfying, and what we need to do to find peace of mind.

The story

At first, Augustine describes his infancy in glowing terms, that remind us of the Garden of Eden, the paradise in Genesis. Just as Adam and Eve are provided with everything they could need and want, the baby Augustine starts his life in a divinely created paradise. He has exactly what he needs, when he needs it, and the person who is nurturing him is happy to do so.

> *I was welcomed by the tender care your mercy provided for me. . . The comforts of human milk were waiting for me, but my mother and my nurses did not fill their own breasts; rather you gave me an infant's nourishment through them in accordance with your plan, from the riches deeply hidden in creation. You restrained me from craving more than you provided, and inspired in those who nurtured me the will to give me what you were giving them, for their love for me was patterned on your law and so they wanted to pass on to me the overflowing gift they received from you. It was a bounty for them, and a bounty for me from them; or, rather, not from them, but only through them, for in truth all good things are from you, O God (1.6.7).*

This is how Adam and Eve were created, in a perfectly balanced world with all of their needs met.

Very soon, however, Augustine describes a different world. This new world isn't like Eden, but very much like our own. It is a world of competition where people want what they can't have; a world of frustration, manipulation, anger, and power. Now the baby is frustrated because other people don't understand him, and he wants things that aren't good for him (maybe he wants to stay up late). So he takes his revenge on everyone in the household, making them as miserable as he is.

> *Little by little I began to notice where I was, and I would try to make my wishes known to those who might satisfy them; but I was frustrated in this, because my desires were inside me, while other people were outside and could by no effort of understanding enter my mind. So I tossed about and screamed, sending signals meant to indicate what I wanted, those few signs that were the best I could manage, though they did not really express my desires. Often I did not get my way, either because people did not understand or because what I demanded might have harmed me (1.6.8).*

To heighten the comparison to the Bible, Augustine also alludes to the Bible's first murder, when Cain kills Abel out of jealousy: "I have watched and experienced for myself the jealousy of a small child: he could not even speak, yet he glared with livid fury at his fellow-nursling" (1.7.11). We sometimes speak of babies as "innocent." For Augustine, however, babies are only innocent because they are too weak to do anything bad. "The minds of babies are far from innocent" (1.7.12).

What is the point?

Augustine gives us a clue to the meaning of this story (and almost every other story in *Confessions*) in the first paragraph of *Confessions*, when he says, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until

they rest in you" (1.1.1). If you take this sentence apart, you'll see that Augustine is telling us a lot about what it means to be human. What he says is that God created us to live in a peaceful and bountiful world, where we had everything we need. But for some reason (we'll hear a lot more about this in later chapters), we, like Adam and Eve, aren't in that world any more. Today we live in a world that is hard and hard on us. And the biggest cost is that we are restless, and constantly searching for happiness, but often looking for it in the wrong place. And we will never really be happy until we find our way back to a closer relationship with God.

The story of the babies isn't about Augustine as an infant. It is really the state of our current restless lives and the only cure for that restlessness, which is to somehow find our way back to the world for which we were originally created.

What does this mean for our own lives?

What do you think? Are most of us restless all the time? Look around you. Do most people seem happy and comfortable with themselves? Or do we live in a world where people are often frustrated, competing with each other for what seems to be scarce resources? If so, have you wondered why life is like this and how we can find greater peace and contentment? If you've faced those same questions, then *Confessions* might be the book for you. Or to put it another way: you might not always agree with Augustine's answers, but maybe you'll see that he is asking the right questions.

A Youthful Crime: Stealing Pears

"I simply wanted to enjoy the theft for its own sake"
(Conf. 2.4.9)

Next, we look at a story from St. Augustine's adolescence, when he and a group of other young boys stole some pears from a nearby orchard. Augustine tells of this seemingly harmless prank with great sorrow and disappointment. It is important to recognize that, for Augustine, the *why* of his actions matters even more than the *what*—a distinction that he clearly explains.

The Story

> *Close to our vineyard there was a pear tree laden with fruit. This fruit was not enticing, either in appearance or in flavor. We nasty lads went there to shake down the fruit and carry it off at dead of night, after prolonging our games out of doors until that late hour according to our abominable custom. We took enormous quantities, not to feast on ourselves but perhaps to throw to the pigs; we did eat a few, but that was not our motive: we derived pleasure from the deed simply because it was forbidden (2.4.9).*

As Augustine recounts the night of the theft, his disdain is obvious. As we read, we realize that it's not the act of stealing the pears that he regrets, but instead the fact that he had no higher purpose or desire in his actions. If he wasn't hungry and didn't need the pears for any other reason, why did he bother taking them? Augustine harps on this question, puzzled by the senselessness of what many would consider a harmless childhood prank.

> *I was under no compulsion of need, unless a lack of moral sense can count as need, and a loathing for justice, and a greedy, full-fed love of sin. Yet I wanted to steal, and steal I did. I already had plenty of what I stole, and of much better quality, too, and I had no desire to enjoy it when I resolved to steal it. I simply wanted to enjoy the theft for its own sake, and the sin (2.4.9).*

It's no accident that one of Augustine's earliest examples of sin and disordered desires involves stealing forbidden fruit. The parallel to Genesis is clear. God provided Adam and Eve with everything they needed to live and access to the entire earth except one forbidden tree. The couple ate of the fruit that God clearly identified as off-limits not because they were hungry, but because they were tempted by its illicitness.

What is the point?

We can see how this story ties into Augustine's greater theology and philosophy only by first understanding his view of sin. In short, Augustine believes that sin results from disordered loves. We sin when we love lower things more than higher ones. It is not that the lower things are bad. They have their own beauty, but our way of loving them is problematic, because we prioritize them over things that are higher. He writes:

> *The beautiful form of material things attracts our eyes, so we are drawn to gold, silver and the like… The life we live here is open to temptation by reason of a certain measure and harmony between its own splendor and all these beautiful things of low degree… Sin gains entrance through these and similar good things when we turn them with immoderate desire, since they are the lowest kind of goods and we thereby turn away from the better and higher: from you yourself, O Lord our God, and your truth and your law (2.5.10).*

Augustine's definition of sin—choosing the lower over the higher—means that sin is not *what* we do, but *why*. A person sins if his or her priorities are improperly ordered. For example, to place a higher priority on worldly success than on God is sinful. Young Augustine's actions are so appalling because he stole merely for the fun of doing something wrong with other people. Committing ungodly actions because they are ungodly is the most lamentable sub-category of sin.

Augustine's *Confessions* can be viewed as an account of his personal transformation from a lowly sinner to a pious bishop. Augustine views the pears incident as one of the lowest points in his life's journey and one of the worst sins he ever committed. This idea often puzzles readers because it seems strange that Augustine would place so much importance on such an apparently inconsequential event. It is the fact that he was doing something only because it was wrong that appalled Augustine. If Augustine had stolen something valuable, like money or expensive property, then his decisions would not have been as deplorable. At least in one of those scenarios, Augustine would have had some type of higher purpose for his actions. But choosing something purely because it is sinful is the most extreme example of choosing the lower over the higher.

What does it mean for our own lives?

In the story of the pears, Augustine reveals perhaps the most challenging aspect of his thinking. He calls us to constantly examine our priorities and to ask ourselves if we are loving higher things or prioritizing things of lower value. Plenty of people do good deeds, but why? Are we helping others because we care about them, or because we want to beef up our volunteer profiles for college or win the approval of our families? The same idea can be applied to our harmful actions. Do the ends justify the means, or are we hurting ourselves or someone else out of defiance? Augustine challenges us to ponder our motives as much as our actions. We need to understand what we are trying to accomplish. Do we desire something we think is lower?

Throughout this story and his entire book, Augustine encourages us to ask ourselves many potentially disheartening questions. It is important to remember, though, that the title is *Confessions*, not *Answers.* We can look to this book, and specifically this passage, to draw parallels to our own lives, and realize that no matter how many years pass, we all struggle to understand the choices we made and what we were trying to accomplish.

Reading Cicero's *Hortensius*

"I was in love with loving"
(Conf. 3.1.1)

At the age of seventeen (the age of today's college freshmen), St. Augustine left his home to go to study in the big city of Carthage. He found himself, "in love with loving" (3.1.1.). This single statement gives us a key to this time in his life. As Augustine grew and changed, he searched for answers to his questions about God, life, and love. As we continue reading, though, we see that Augustine looked for good things, but often in the wrong places.

The Story

While at Carthage, Augustine studied rhetoric but also looked for love in sexual pursuits.

> *Loving and being loved were sweet to me, the more so, if I could also enjoy a lover's body; so I polluted the stream of friendship with my filthy desires and clouded its purity with hellish lusts; yet all while, befouled and disgraced though I was, my boundless vanity made me long to appear elegant and sophisticated (3.1.1.).*

He also spent a great deal of time attending the theatre. But then he had an experience that changed his life. During his course of study, Augustine read *Hortensius,* a now lost work by Cicero. This book was assigned to him as a model of rhetorical style, but when he read it he reacted to its content, not the style.

> *The book changed my way of feeling and the character of my prayers to you, O Lord, for under its influence my petitions and desires altered. All my hollow hopes suddenly seemed worthless, and with unbelievable intensity my heart burned with longing for the immortality that wisdom seemed to promise (3.4.7).*

Hortensius changed something in Augustine. It opened him to new and exciting religious and philosophical experiences. (Today the image of "the burning heart" is often associated with St. Augustine and is in the middle of the official seal of Villanova University.)

The seal of Villanova University

In the pursuit of these experiences, Augustine decided to learn more about God by reading the Scriptures. However, Augustine was repelled by what he read in the Bible because he felt that the Bible was poorly written.

> *My swollen pride recoiled from its style and my intelligence failed to penetrate to its inner meaning (3.5.9).*

Augustine's superficial intellect precluded him from understanding the Scriptures. He rejected them for stylistic reasons rather than for their meaning. Because of his aversion to the Scriptures, Augustine joined the Manicheans — a religious-philosophical sect with some superficial similarities to Christianity. The Manicheans believed in a constant and eternal struggle of light and dark, or good and evil, in the world.

> *[They were] a set of proud mad men, exceedingly carnal and talkative people in whose mouths were diabolical snares and a sticky mess compounded by mixing of the syllables of your name, and the names of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, who is our Paraclete and Consoler. These names were never far from their mouths, but amounted to no more than sound and the clacking of tongues, for their hearts were empty of the truth (3.6.10).*

Augustine spent nearly nineteen years with this group, much to his mother's dismay. A devout Christian, his mother, Monica, tried many times to convert Augustine. However, she was reassured by a vision she had telling her that Augustine would eventually convert.

> *Another telling point was that when [Monica] had related the vision to me, and I had launched into an attempt to persuade her that she must not give up hope of someday becoming what I was, she promptly replied, without the slightest hesitation, "No: I was not told, 'where he is, you will be too,' but, 'where you are, he will be'" (3.11.20).*

This quote by Monica haunted Augustine, and he ruminated on its significance, but he did not question his association with the Manicheans.

What's the point?

Augustine traveled through Carthage trying to find good things. He searched for God, salvation, love and truth—in all the wrong places. When looking for love, for example, he instead encountered sex. Although he was on a better track after reading *Hortensius*, Augustine's pride limited his understanding. We see that

Augustine's journey was like a ladder, not an instant conversion. Because his loves were disordered, Augustine struggled to find God, and his pride was his ultimate inhibition. Through the events of his years at Carthage, Augustine highlights the immense pride he had and how it affected his life.

What does this mean for our own lives?

As college students, we believe we are invincible. This arrogance causes us to pretend to know many more things than we actually know. Like Augustine, our pride clouds our judgment, and can cause our parents' grief, as Augustine with his mother, Monica. This grief is a result of Augustine's desire to rebel against Monica. Like any teenager, Augustine wants to have his own life and discover himself away from his family.

Augustine's journey through school in Carthage reflects many of the struggles of modern college students. First, he found pleasure in physical interaction, as do many college freshmen today. He then studied rhetoric, but, as many college students find after exploring their first majors, it led him to a dead end. Augustine finally reached the right path through his baptism and conversion—a happy ending students hope to reach by the time of graduation.

Death of a Friend

"I was amazed that other mortals went on living when he was dead whom I had loved as though he would never die…"
(Conf. 4.6.11)

Eventually Augustine became a highly successful teacher of rhetoric and also had a relationship with a woman who bore him a son. Although he might have appeared on the surface to be happy, Augustine encapsulates his life by telling us about a relationship he had with a special friend, whom he had known since childhood. The unmanageable grief he felt when the friend died forced Augustine to reflect on what in his life was so erroneous to result in such a deep depression.

The Story

Augustine describes the friendship this way:

> *When I first began to teach in the town where I was born, I had a friend who shared my interests and was exceedingly dear to me. He was the same age as myself and, like me, now in the flower of young manhood. As a boy he had grown up with me; we had gone to school together and played together. He was not then such a friend to me as he was to become later, though even at the later time of which I speak our union fell short of true friendship, because friendship is genuine only when you bind fast together people who cleave to you through the charity poured abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (4.4.7).*

During the year when their friendship was strongest, Augustine persuaded his friend away from a superficial belief in Christianity and towards Augustine's Manichean ideals. Part of the attraction for Augustine appears to be the manipulation and control of his friend. Eventually the friend is struck with a terrible fever and appears to be so close to death that his family has him baptized.

> *As my friend struggled with fever he lay for a long time unconscious and sweating at death's door; and as hope for his recovery dwindled he was baptized without his knowledge. I cared little for this, since I took it for granted that his mind was more likely to retain what he had received from me, irrespective of any rite performed on his unconscious body (4.4.8).*

However, the friend recovered, and Augustine went to him, expecting to lead him away from Christianity.

> *I attempted to chaff him, expecting him to join me in making fun of the baptism he had undergone while entirely absent in mind and unaware of what was happening. But he had already learned that he had received it, and he recoiled from me with a shudder as though I had been his enemy, and with amazing, new-*

found independence warned me that if I wished to be his friend I had better stop saying such things to him (4.4.8).

Soon after the friend died. Augustine fell into a deep depression, not just because the friend died, but also because his friend had refused to be manipulated by him. "I had become a great enigma to myself, and I questioned my soul, demanding why it was sorrowful and why it so disquieted me, but it had no answer" (4.4.9.). Because he was incapable of continuing with his life and because his grief was so severe, Augustine was forced to reevaluate his life to determine what went wrong.

What is the point?

The death of Augustine's childhood friend serves as an awakening for Augustine. Leading up to this tragedy, Augustine ignored the issue of his misplaced priority of God. However, when "black grief closed over [his] heart," Augustine was forced into self-reflection. As we saw in the pears incident, the problem was that Augustine's loves were disordered, loving his friend as an extension of himself, as something to manipulate. He tells us that he had loved his friend "as though he would never die" and consequently he "was miserable, and miserable too is everyone whose mind is chained by friendship with mortal things" (4.6.11). This incident was thus another critical turning point in helping him realize that his misery and restlessness were caused by his inappropriate love for the things of this world.

What does this mean for our own lives?

A typical college student should find this passage in Augustine applicable because it speaks to a relevant problem in college life: priorities. In the case of Augustine, he finds his life in ruin because he has chosen to love the lower, his friend, over the higher, God. For a college student, serious problems begin to arise when he or she chooses to focus more on the trivial things over what truly matters. The lower might take the form of popularity, alcohol, drugs, appearance, social perception; and the higher might take the form of making deep and meaningful relationships, getting a good education, taking advantage of positive faith experiences on campus, building a good resume, getting involved with clubs and activities, and eventually getting a good job. Just as Augustine suffers great consequences in misplacing priorities, college students will also eventually experience great consequences. When faced with the priorities in the proper order, college is meant to prepare young minds for careers in the real world. When students go to college, they are meant to leave as well-informed and competent citizens. However, a college experience wasted on desiring the lower over the higher can end in unredeemable debt. It is essential, following Augustine, to align priorities based on importance in order to avoid the devastation that comes with loving the lower over the higher.

The Problem of Evil

"Whence, then, comes evil?"
(Conf. 7.5.7)

After the death of his friend, St. Augustine went into a period of great searching. Eventually, he encountered St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, and through hearing him Augustine became more attracted to Christianity. However, two issues held him back from immediate conversion. First, he could not reconcile the co-existence of evil with an all-good, all-powerful God. Second, he found that he could not give up his worldly desires for status and sex. In seeking an answer to the first question, Augustine soon entered a profound meditation on the meaning of evil and his own purpose in life.

The Story

Augustine initially considered evil to be a reality: "Whence, then, comes evil?" (7.5.7). Augustine was confident that God is certainly good, and surrounds the world with good things. But he struggled with finding the

source of evil: “Either the evil we fear exists, or our fear itself is the evil” (7.5.7). In searching for the solution, Augustine saw that “[he] was seeking the origin of evil, but seeking in an evil way, and failing to see the evil inherent in [his] search itself” (7.5.7). He began to discover that the problem of evil was rooted within free will.

> *The cause of evil is the free decision of our will, in consequence of which we act wrongly and suffer your righteous judgment (7.3.4).*

Augustine realized that everything God has created is good.

> *I saw that you have made all good things, and that there are absolutely no substances that you have not made. They all exist because they are severally good but collectively very good, for our God has made all things exceedingly good (7.12.18).*

Human interaction with these creations leads to our perception of evil through our choosing the lower good over the higher. Therefore, evil is in the action, not in the reality.

> *I inquired then what villainy might be, but I found no substance, only the perversity of a will twisted away from you, God, the supreme substance, towards the depths (7.16.22).*

In other words, everything has its place of value in the world with respect to God, and whenever this order is disrupted for selfish desires, evil is the result.

> *He is the greater good, to be sure, the supreme good, and the things he has made are lesser goods; nonetheless creator and creatures are all good (7.5.7).*
>
> *Everything that exists is good, then; and so evil, the source of which I was seeking, cannot be a substance, because if it were, it would be good (7.12.18).*

Thus God did not create evil. Sin occurs when humans choose lesser goods over higher ones.

What is the point?

Augustine’s conclusion is surprising. Evil does not really exist. The human flaw in free will creates the illusion of evil as a substance, when, in reality, it arises in our failure to choose the higher creations over the lower. Augustine learns to focus on God, who is totality, because “totality was better than the higher things on their own would have been” (7.13.19). All of God’s creations should be enjoyed and appreciated to an appropriate extent.

So why does this solution fail to lead to Augustine’s conversion to Christianity? His solution is philosophically perfect in that it makes logical sense, but psychologically lacking in that it failed to compel him to give up his obsession with status and sexuality. The philosophical solution in and of itself is useless. Although he was “drawn toward [God] by [God’s] beauty,” St. Augustine was “swiftly dragged away from [God] by his own weight,” which was “carnal habit,” the physical hindrance of desire for worldly goods (7.17.23). As we see in the next section, it is only after he breaks free of this compulsion that he can embrace Christianity.

What does this mean for our own lives?

Where does evil arise in our own lives? Where does our evil come from? Are we gluttonous or envious? Are we materialistic or self-indulgent in earthly desire? How could we possibly resolve this? Evil is in our choices. It is not something that exists outside of us. Rather, it is the result of the choices we make ourselves. External objects are not evil. However, the ways we use and prioritize objects can be evil.

By understanding that choices, not objects, are evil, Augustine discovered the importance of making decisions. The actions someone chooses to take determine whether or not they do good or evil. This insight is especially relevant to college students because college is, in essence, all about making decisions. Not only do students have significantly more independence than they have ever enjoyed before, they also have to make choices that can impact their entire lives. College students live away from their parents, often for the first time. Additionally, students no longer have to follow a strict high school curriculum. Rather, they can choose any classes they want. Decisions made at college can dramatically influence a person’s life. Thus, every college student should be aware of the importance of making good decisions.

Conversion in the Garden: *Tolle Lege*

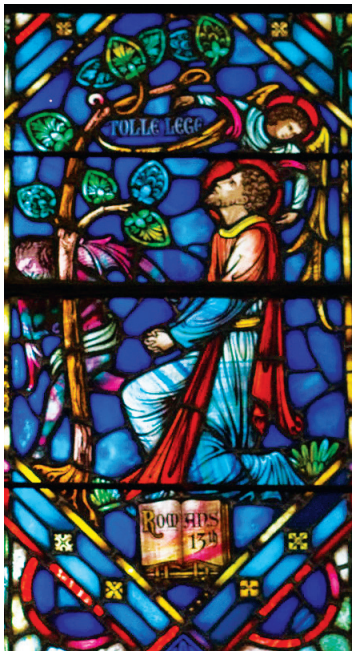
"The light of certainty flooded my heart, and all doubt faded away" (Conf. 8.12.29)

After his many struggles, Augustine finally recognized that only God could bring him the peace he had been seeking for so many years. In the last chapter, we saw how he resolved the problem of evil, which was one of the two obstacles that prevented him from embracing Christianity. But Augustine was still troubled by his compulsion for social status and sexuality. These desires continued to weigh Augustine down and make him restless. His experience in the garden, though, was the moment when Augustine overcame his personal attachments and achieved the peace for which he longed.

The Story

Augustine was ready to convert, understanding that God was the only path to satisfy his restless heart, but he was unable to fully accept what he knew he needed. Augustine reminds us that, so often, we will come to understand what we need long before we are willing to fully accept it.

> *Your words were now firmly implanted in my heart of hearts, and I was besieged by you on every side. Concerning your eternal life I was now quite certain, though I had but glimpsed it like a tantalizing reflection in a mirror; this had been enough to take from me any lingering doubt concerning that imperishable substance from which every other substance derives its being. What I now longed for was not greater certainty about you, but a more steadfast abiding in you. In my daily life everything seemed to be teetering, and my heart needed to be cleansed of the old leaven. I was attracted to the Way, which is our Savior himself, but the narrowness of the path daunted me and I still could not walk in it (8.1.1).*



Augustine's conversion in the garden

Augustine needed God's help for his conversion to occur because he did not have the strength to follow God by himself. Augustine sat in a garden under a fig tree—a scene that, like the story of the pears, reflects the imagery of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis. He then heard some children singing, "*tolle lege*," which in Latin means "take it up and read" (8.12.29). He took this phrase as a sign from God that he should pick up a Bible and read the first passage he saw. The passage he read resonated with the problems that Augustine faced every day, especially his obsession with status and his physical desires.

> *Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh (Rom. 13:13).*

This passage was the breakthrough he had been longing for.

> *I had no wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away (8.12.29).*

After reading this passage, Augustine became free enough to organize his life around a love for God. He recognized that things of the world could not rival God in any way and that loving these earthly things would not bring him peace or happiness. Loving other things more than God led to

Augustine's restlessness, but his conversion allowed him to see that God was the only path to true happiness. As a result, Augustine was freed to dedicate his life to God.

What is the point?

Augustine shows us that the whole conversion process is not one step or one event, but rather a long progression. The story also shows us that we cannot always make changes by ourselves. In the moment Augustine actually picked up the Bible and read the passage that changed him, he was intellectually and spiritually prepared to change. Augustine was brilliant, but his intellect was not enough to find the answer to his unhappiness. Rather, it was God's inspiration that finally pushed Augustine toward the event that allowed him to convert. In the garden, Augustine responded to the desires of God in a way that Adam and Eve did not. They wanted to be like gods, and this desire ruined them. However, in a very similar situation, through an event that also centered on a tree in a garden, Augustine reversed this act of disobedience. And so he achieved the peaceful world which Adam and Eve left behind when they chose to sin.

What does this mean for our own lives?

We all have moments in our lives when we recognize that we are not happy or at peace. We often feel stuck because we know what we need, but cannot bring ourselves to accept the clear solution. Admitting that we need help and then actually accepting it is a long and difficult process. Just as Augustine finally admitted that he could not reach the kind of happiness he desired without God, we also can only move forward by accepting that we may have to rely on God, family, or friends to help us.

Baptism

"And so we were baptized"
(Conf. 9.6.14)

After St. Augustine's conversion, he was officially baptized into the Church, marking a new beginning in his life. Throughout *Confessions*, he uses the sacrament of baptism to explain his ideas. For reasons we will see, he does not explore the literal actions of the sacrament, but instead focuses on what baptism means in his life and how it relates to us. Although Augustine gives a cursory description of the sacrament, his real reason for writing about baptism is to teach us about ourselves.

The Story

Augustine's story of baptism is relatively short. He only spends a few sentences describing what happens.

> *The time arrived for me to give in my name for baptism, so we left the country and moved back to Milan… And so we were baptized, and all our dread about our earlier lives dropped away from us (9.6.14).*

Why would Augustine spend so little time on such a central moment? For Augustine, the importance of baptism is its spiritual effects, not the ritual itself.

In Augustine's youth, he had a faulty idea of what baptism accomplishes. He and his parents viewed it as a sort of "get out of jail free card" in which all of his sins would be washed away after he was baptized. Someone can only be baptized once, so when Augustine fell ill as a young child, his family had to decide whether to baptize him immediately in case he died, or to risk waiting so that the baptism could erase more of the sins Augustine would commit if he lived.

> *They would have hastened to ensure that I was initiated into the saving sacraments and washed clean by confessing you, Lord Jesus, for the forgiveness of my sins, had I not rapidly recovered. My cleansing was therefore deferred on the pretext that if I lived I would inevitably soil myself again, for it was held that the guilt of sinful defilement incurred after the laver of baptism was graver and more perilous (1.11.17).*

Augustine and his parents thus had an immature understanding of baptism. They saw it in an oversimplified way, misrepresenting it as a physical action that God performs for humans, giving them a loophole to avoid punishment for their sins. Augustine noted that "we still hear nowadays people saying on all sides of another person, 'Let him be, let him do as he likes, he is not baptized yet' " (1.11.18).

However, when Augustine's view changed after his conversion, he not only believed baptism brings one spiritually closer to God, but also believed people should lead their lives differently after receiving the sacrament. Augustine now believed that people have three purposes in life: belief, service, and evangelization.

Baptism is not something to be abused selfishly, but instead is a gift bestowed on people to be cherished and nurtured like any good relationship. We can see Augustine's change in thought because he no longer wished for a 'clean slate,' but instead wanted a closer communion with a God that will bring peace and goodness to himself and those around him. By being baptized, Augustine effectively intertwined both God and the Church into his life.

What is the point?

Throughout his lifetime, Augustine's experiences shaped the way he viewed both baptism and God. By starting at the beginning, Augustine could discuss his incorrect beliefs as well as their development. Thus, Augustine allows us to grow and change with him until we reach a correct understanding of baptism. Baptism is more than the forgiveness of sins. It is obtaining and nurturing a close relationship with God by fully accepting Him into one's life and heart. To be baptized is to be saved and altered in a way that truly changes one's self. Baptism is not about escaping punishment for past sins. Rather, it is a commitment to lead a better life in the future.

What does this mean for our own lives?

According to Augustine, the implications extend far beyond the physical act of being baptized. Ultimately, Augustine is talking about something bigger. To him, baptism signifies rebirth and a change for the better. As we travel through life, we must recognize moments in which our core values change. Thus, we can grow more mature and become more human. By being mindful of what has made us better human beings, we can continue to follow the path to spiritual growth and maturity.

Augustine's Mother: Monica

"Son of tears"
(*Conf*. 3.12.21)

When St. Augustine relates the story of his conversion in *Confessions*, he says that the first thing he did upon accepting Christianity was tell his mother, Monica, who rejoiced with him over his newfound faith. Monica was present at the time of his conversion and baptism, and was an important influence on Augustine throughout his entire life. His mother's life shaped Augustine's. Monica's life even paralleled Augustine's, since she struggled with many of the same issues that Augustine dealt with throughout his youth and young adulthood. As she grew older, Monica turned more and more to God, and she prayed constantly for Augustine to do the same. Monica overcame her youthful sins, and due to her faith and good example, she eventually became a role model for Augustine and for Christians everywhere.

The Story

At the end of Monica's life, Augustine realized that his mother faced many problems in her youth that matched his own. As a girl, Monica stole her parents' wine "not from any real craving for drink, but from a certain exuberance of youthful naughtiness" (9.8.18). We already discussed a similar situation—Augustine's encounter with the pears. Augustine sinned for no particular reason but the thrill of doing something wrong, and his mother did the same when she was young.

Monica eventually became a religious and moral adult. She spent her time "weeping for [Augustine] more bitterly than ever mothers wept for the bodily death of their children" (3.11.19). Monica hoped and prayed for Augustine to become religious and not to be led astray by the temptations of status and sex. While Augustine led a life of sin, Monica constantly prayed for his conversion.

> *Throughout those years my mother, a chaste, God-fearing, sensible widow of the kind so dear to you, though more eager in her hope was no less assiduous in her weeping and entreaty, never at any time ceasing her plangent prayers to you about me (3.11.20).*

Even though Monica had overcome her childish, sinful ways, she was still tempted to prioritize status over more godly things. Monica found herself tempted, in particular, by valuing earthly status over the state of the soul. Augustine spoke of the way his mother placed importance on his worldly success rather than his spiritual life:

> *Her reluctance to arrange a marriage for me arose from the fear that if I were encumbered with a wife my hope could be dashed - not hope in you for the world to come, to which she held herself, but my hope of academic success (2.3.8).*

Monica and Augustine both struggled with sin before finding a true, religious life in God. When Augustine finally converted, it was his mother that he was most excited to share the news with, and together they came close to reaching God at Ostia.

> *Higher still we mounted by inward thought and wondering discourse on your works, and we arrived at the summit of our own minds; and this too we transcended, to touch that land of never-failing plenty (9.10.23).*

Augustine & Monica

Monica served as a parallel and then as a role model for Augustine. Monica could help Augustine with his problems because she experienced similar ones on her journey toward a religious life.

What is the point?

Monica and Augustine are both examples of sinners who converted and devoted their lives to God. Both sinned for the sake of sinning—Monica stole wine and Augustine stole pears merely for the sake of doing so. Both experienced changes of heart as they overcame their sinful ways to become true Christians.

Monica's story also demonstrates the importance of other people in the development of one's spiritual life. Monica's example and prayers were integral to Augustine's conversion. She introduced him to God. Augustine writes, "I was regularly signed with the cross and given his salt even from the womb of my mother, who firmly trusted in you" (1.11.17). In addition, Monica was frequently mentioned weeping and praying for her son to find God. Her prayers and example eventually had an effect, and Augustine finally converted. It was as if watching out for Augustine's soul was the sole purpose of her life at this point, for as soon as Augustine converted, Monica died—content that her son had found God.

What does this mean for our own lives?

Augustine's portrayal of Monica is relatable to many children today. He sees his mother as the perfect example

of religious life in his youth, but like many children, Augustine only learned of his mother's faults at the end of her life. Augustine learned that his mother had to deal with similar problems. As young people approach their adulthood, they see parallels between their lives and the lives of their parents and that their parents faced similar pitfalls. And still, our parents influence our actions, working to guide us toward what they believe is the best life for us. We, like Augustine, see our parents as role models, but as we grow, we come to understand their shortcomings and see the commonalities we have with them.

Experiences with death

"True, she had been brought to new life in Christ"
(*Conf*. 9.13.34)

A few months after his conversion and baptism, St. Augustine's mother died. Augustine closes the autobiographical portion of *Confessions* with a description of his reaction to her death. As we have seen with all of the events we have discussed, Augustine tells of his experiences with death as a way of using his own journey to teach us larger themes. In *Confessions,* Augustine faces four deaths, each at a different point in his life. Each epitomizes a different level of spiritual development, contrasting his early self-centeredness with his eventual maturity. Two of the deaths provide contrasting examples of how to remember a deceased loved one, and two portray different ways of grieving.

The Story

- Death of Father (3.4.7). Augustine's first encounter with death was when his father passed away. This event occurred two years before his spiritual journey began with his reading of Hortensius (described above). Unfortunately, he was still so immature that he judged others based purely on how useful they were to him. Thus, the only mention of his father's death is a parenthetical remark to explain that the "studies I was now pursuing in my nineteenth year" were paid for "at my mother's expense, since my father had died two years earlier" (3.4.7). Augustine did not value his father except for his usefulness. Apparently Augustine chose not to grieve, perhaps because it would be too painful. Rather than succumbing to pain, Augustine trivializes the event.

- Death of Friend (4.4.7-4.7.12). Years later, Augustine's best friend died. Augustine had become a Manichean and the 'friendship' was based on the fact that Augustine converted his friend. While Augustine cared about the friend and grieved for the loss, his 'compassion' was still selfish. Augustine missed his friend because Augustine had control of him. The friend died to Augustine not at his actual time of death, but days prior, when his friend was baptized and gained "new-found independence" (4.4.8).

- Death of Monica (9.11.27-9.13.37). When his mother passed away after his conversion, Augustine grieved genuinely and healthily because, for the first time, Augustine had correctly ordered priorities. Augustine finally had God, not himself, as his focal point. Thus, he did not trivialize the death, as he did his father's death, or treat the death as all-important, as he did with the death of his friend. Rather, Augustine took time to mourn, and then accepted the fact that Monica "had been brought to new life in Christ, and even before her release from her body she so lived that her faith and conduct redounded to the glory of God's name" (9.13.34).

- Death of Son, Adeodatus (9.6.14). The final death that Augustine describes is that of Adeodatus (although in the book, it is described before Monica's death). Here Augustine models how to remember

a deceased loved one. Although Augustine no doubt mourned the death of his son, he was finally able to recall his son fondly and say that "I remember him without anxiety, for I have no doubt about anything in his boyhood or adolescence; indeed I fear nothing whatever for that man" (9.6.14). His ability to grieve healthily combined with his faith in God allowed Augustine to remember his son happily, without perpetual mourning.

What is the point?

Augustine arranges these descriptions to invite comparisons. The brief mentions of his farther and his son demand a comparison, as do the much longer descriptions of Augustine's mourning after the deaths of the friend and Monica (both of whom died of fever). Each of the long descriptions is preceded by one of the brief descriptions (even though Augustine needs to change the chronology of his son's death to make this work out). The first two deaths (father and friend) provide negative examples for grief and the last two provide positive ones. Note that in the first stories, neither his father nor the friend is mentioned by name. Perhaps Augustine did this to suggest that at the time he cared about them only for their relation to him, not their inherent worth. In contrast, when describing the death of his son and his mother, Augustine was mature enough to call them by their names and to understand that the world revolved around God, not around himself. The deaths of his father and Adeodatus provide examples of different ways of remembering the deceased: either unhealthily ignoring or fondly recalling their lives. Similarly, the deaths of the friend and Monica provide contrasting examples of how to grieve, either selfishly or unselfishly. The deaths of his father and the friend reveal how a self-centered worldview prevents healthy grief, while the deaths of Adeodatus and Monica exemplify how acceptance of God leads to maturity and inner peace.

What does this mean for our own lives?

At first, it may seem difficult to relate to Augustine. Before he was forty, Augustine had lost his father, his best friend, his mother and his son. Although modern medicine makes such tragedy less likely, we can still learn from Augustine's responses to loss. We must remember that while death is its most tragic example, loss is a quintessential aspect of the human condition. Any time we suffer a loss, our reaction will be similar to Augustine's. We can use the reasons behind Augustine's reactions to understand our emotions. In addition, Augustine's later reactions to death can serve as a guide for grief. Augustine grieved for Monica unselfishly and, therefore, healthily. Augustine's sentiment about Adeodatus reflected the fact that Augustine could fondly recall his son's life, rather than perennially mourning his death. Finally, the deaths in *Confessions* remind us that Augustine took many years to become a mature Christian. Reading *Confessions* reminds us that even Augustine, one of the most brilliant theologians of Christianity, began life as an arrogant and self-centered person.

Life After Conversion

"To you, then, Lord, I lie exposed, exactly as I am"
(*Conf 10.2.2)*

The final chapters of *Confessions* reconcile St. Augustine's account of his journey to conversion with the man who is now a bishop and author. He seems to realize that his readers may think that after his conversion his struggles will be completely over and he will live a painless life of prayer and leadership. This is the opposite of what he is trying to teach in *Confessions*. Living as God intended is always a challenge. Augustine wants us to know that he struggled in the path to conversion and still does. By sharing the rough places in his own journey, he wishes to help his readers understand that they must not lose hope if the way is difficult.

The Story

After reflecting upon his life, Augustine realizes that the same problems afflict him now. He has various desires

that do not order his life towards the highest of goods, and he desperately seeks an end to this state.

> *When at last I cling to you with my whole being there will be no more anguish or labor for me, and my life will be alive indeed, because filled with you. But now it is very different. Anyone whom you fill you also uplift, but I am not full of you, and so I am a burden to myself. Joys over which I ought to weep do battle with sorrows that should be matter for joy, and I know not which will be victorious. But I also see griefs that are evil at war in me with joys that are good, and I know not which will win the day (10.28.39).*

Augustine recalls how all of the senses, touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight, all lead to temptation. All are gifts from God and are therefore good, but if used improperly they can lead to great sin. However, the greatest temptation for Augustine remains pride.

> *This is the temptation to want veneration and affection from others, and to want them not for the sake of some quality that merits them, but in order to make such admiration itself the cause of my joy. It is no true joy at all, but leads only to a miserable life and shameful ostentation. This tendency is one of the chief impediments to loving you and revering you with chaste fear, and therefore you thwart the proud but give your grace to the humble (10.36.59).*

Augustine reasons that there is no real way to overcome humanity's tendency to be tempted. However, if he accepts that he needs God's help to remain pure, then he will be much better suited to overcoming his temptations. He will also be able to see himself in light of reality as opposed to seeing himself as others see him.

What is the point?

Augustine reminds the reader that the process of learning obedience to the will of God is a just that, a process. No person can just wake up one day and forget all the constant temptations inherent in living one's life in the world. Even the great Bishop of Hippo found himself in a constant state of temptation and sin, regardless of his desire to completely accept the will of God. Human beings are inherently perfect, but in this fallen world they will always find themselves struggling to do what is right. The irony, St. Augustine notes, is that the better the person, the greater the likelihood of falling into the temptation of pride. However, this should not serve as a reason to stop trying. Augustine recognizes that our inability to become perfect does not free us from our obligation to strive for perfection with all our heart. The recognition that only God can perfect us cannot throw us into despair. We should hope to receive his grace to overcome sin.

What does this mean for our lives?

Oftentimes, we see other people who are picturesque stories of success, either in the world or in their personal lives. We often forget that they too struggled on the path to worldly success or personal happiness. Augustine wanted to use his *Confessions* to enable others to see that even the apparently successful struggle in their own lives. We also see that, just like ourselves, even great people like Augustine continue to struggle in their daily lives. While this fact will dishearten some, many find this realization to be comforting. We should never be complacent with failure, but we can rejoice in the fact that there are seven billion other people in the world in need of and seeking the exact same help we require.

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