

THE
ROAD TO
CHARACTER

DAVID BROOKS



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Brooks, David.

The road to character / David Brooks.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8129-9325-7

eBook ISBN 978-0-679-64503-0

1. Character. 2. Virtues. 3. Humility. I. Title.

BF818.B764 2015 170'.44—dc23 2015001791

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

www.atrandom.com

6 8 9 7 5

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman

INTRODUCTION: ADAM II

RECENTLY I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our education system is certainly oriented around the résumé virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation is, too—the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction bestsellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop a profound character.

One book that has helped me think about these two sets of virtues is *Lonely Man of Faith*, which was written by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in 1965. Soloveitchik noted that there are two accounts of creation in Genesis and argued that these represent the two opposing sides of our nature, which he called Adam I and Adam II.

Modernizing Soloveitchik's categories a bit, we could say that Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is

the external, résumé Adam. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories.

Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam II wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong—not only to do good, but to be good. Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one's own possibilities.

While Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world. While Adam I is creative and savors his own accomplishments, Adam II sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose. While Adam I asks how things work, Adam II asks why things exist, and what ultimately we are here for. While Adam I wants to venture forth, Adam II wants to return to his roots and savor the warmth of a family meal. While Adam I's motto is "Success," Adam II experiences life as a moral drama. His motto is "Charity, love, and redemption."

Soloveitchik argued that we live in the contradiction between these two Adams. The outer, majestic Adam and the inner, humble Adam are not fully reconcilable. We are forever caught in self-confrontation. We are called to fulfill both personae, and must master the art of living forever within the tension between these two natures.

The hard part of this confrontation, I'd add, is that Adams I and II live by different logics. Adam I—the creating, building, and discovering Adam—lives by a straightforward utilitarian logic. It's the logic of economics. Input leads to output. Effort leads to reward. Practice makes perfect. Pursue self-interest. Maximize your utility. Impress the world.

Adam II lives by an inverse logic. It's a moral logic, not an economic one. You have to give to receive. You have to surrender to something outside yourself to gain strength within yourself. You have to conquer your desire to get what you crave. Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning. In order to fulfill yourself, you have to forget yourself. In order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself.

To nurture your Adam I career, it makes sense to cultivate your strengths. To nurture your Adam II moral core, it is necessary to confront your weaknesses.

The Shrewd Animal

WE LIVE IN A CULTURE THAT NURTURES ADAM I, THE EXTERNAL ADAM, AND neglects Adam II. We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life. The competition to succeed and win admiration is so fierce that it becomes all-consuming. The consumer marketplace encourages us to live by a utilitarian calculus, to satisfy our desires and lose sight of the moral stakes involved in everyday decisions. The noise of fast and shallow communications makes it harder to hear the quieter sounds that emanate from the depths. We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character.

If you are only Adam I, you turn into a shrewd animal, a crafty, self-preserving creature who is adept at playing the game and who turns everything into a game. If that's all you have, you spend a lot of time cultivating professional skills, but you don't have a clear idea of the sources of meaning in life, so you don't know where you should devote your skills, which career path will be highest and best. Years pass and the deepest parts of yourself go unexplored and unstructured. You are busy, but you have a vague anxiety that your life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. You live with an unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth. You lack the internal criteria to make unshakable commitments. You never develop inner constancy, the integrity that can withstand popular disapproval or a serious blow. You find yourself doing things that other people approve of, whether these things are right for you or not. You foolishly judge other people by their abilities, not by their worth. You do not have a strategy to build character, and without that, not only your inner life but also your external life will eventually fall to pieces.

This book is about Adam II. It's about how some people have cultivated strong character. It's about one mindset that people through the centuries have adopted to put iron in their core and to cultivate a wise heart. I wrote it, to be honest, to save my own soul.

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I was born with a natural disposition toward shallowness. I now work as a pundit and columnist. I'm paid to be a narcissistic blow-hard, to volley my opinions, to appear more confident about them than I really am, to appear smarter than I really am, to appear better and more authoritative than I really am. I have to work harder than most people to avoid a life of smug superficiality. I've also become more aware that, like many people these days, I have lived a life of vague moral aspiration—vaguely wanting to be good, vaguely wanting to serve some larger purpose, while lacking a concrete moral vocabulary, a clear understanding of how to live a rich inner life, or even a clear knowledge of how character is developed and depth is achieved.

I've discovered that without a rigorous focus on the Adam II side of our nature, it is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You follow your desires wherever they take you, and you approve of yourself so long as you are not obviously hurting anyone else. You figure that if the people around you seem to like you, you must be good enough. In the process you end up slowly turning yourself into something a little less impressive than you had originally hoped. A humiliating gap opens up between your actual self and your desired self. You realize that the voice of your Adam I is loud but the voice of your Adam II is muffled; the life plan of Adam I is clear, but the life plan of Adam II is fuzzy; Adam I is alert, Adam II is sleepwalking.

I wrote this book not sure I could follow the road to character, but I wanted at least to know what the road looks like and how other people have trodden it.

The Plan

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK IS SIMPLE. IN THE NEXT CHAPTER I WILL DESCRIBE an older moral ecology. It was a cultural and intellectual tradition, the "crooked timber" tradition, that emphasized our own brokenness. It was a tradition that demanded humility in the face of our own limitations. But it was also a tradition that held that each of us has the power to confront our own weaknesses, tackle our own sins, and that in the course of this confrontation with ourselves we build character. By

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successfully confronting sin and weakness we have the chance to play our role in a great moral drama. We can shoot for something higher than happiness. We have a chance to take advantage of everyday occasions to build virtue in ourselves and be of service to the world.

Then I will describe what this character-building method looks like in real life. I'm going to do this through biographical essays, which are also moral essays. Since Plutarch, moralists have tried to communicate certain standards by holding up exemplars. You can't build rich Adam II lives simply by reading sermons or following abstract rules. Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs.

This truth was hammered home to me after I wrote a column expressing frustration with how hard it is to use the classroom experience to learn how to be good. A veterinarian named Dave Jolly sent me an email that cut to the chase:

The heart cannot be taught in a classroom intellectually, to students mechanically taking notes. . . . Good, wise hearts are obtained through lifetimes of diligent effort to dig deeply within and heal lifetimes of scars. . . . You can't teach it or email it or tweet it. It has to be discovered within the depths of one's own heart when a person is finally ready to go looking for it, and not before.

The job of the wise person is to swallow the frustration and just go on setting an example of caring and digging and diligence in their own lives. What a wise person teaches is the smallest part of what they give. The totality of their life, of the way they go about it in the smallest details, is what gets transmitted.

Never forget that. The message is the person, perfected over lifetimes of effort that was set in motion by yet another wise person now hidden from the recipient by the dim mists of time. Life is much bigger than we think, cause and effect intertwined in a vast moral structure that keeps pushing us to do better, become better, even when we dwell in the most painful confused darkness.

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Those words explain the methodology of this book. The subjects of the portraits that follow in chapters 2 through 10 are a diverse set, white and black, male and female, religious and secular, literary and nonliterary. None of them is even close to perfect. But they practiced a mode of living that is less common now. They were acutely aware of their own weaknesses. They waged an internal struggle against their sins and emerged with some measure of self-respect. And when we think of them, it is not primarily what they accomplished that we remember—great though that may have been—it is who they were. I'm hoping their examples will fire this fearful longing we all have to be better, to follow their course.

In the final chapter I wrap these themes up. I describe how our culture has made it harder to be good, and I summarize this "crooked timber" approach to life in a series of specific points. If you're impatient for the condensed message of this book, skip to the end.

Occasionally, even today, you come across certain people who seem to possess an impressive inner cohesion. They are not leading fragmented, scattershot lives. They have achieved inner integration. They are calm, settled, and rooted. They are not blown off course by storms. They don't crumble in adversity. Their minds are consistent and their hearts are dependable. Their virtues are not the blooming virtues you see in smart college students; they are the ripening virtues you see in people who have lived a little and have learned from joy and pain.

Sometimes you don't even notice these people, because while they seem kind and cheerful, they are also reserved. They possess the self-effacing virtues of people who are inclined to be useful but don't need to prove anything to the world: humility, restraint, reticence, temperance, respect, and soft self-discipline.

They radiate a sort of moral joy. They answer softly when challenged harshly. They are silent when unfairly abused. They are dignified when others try to humiliate them, restrained when others try to provoke them. But they get things done. They perform acts of sacrificial service with the same modest everyday spirit they would display if they were just getting the groceries. They are not thinking about what impressive work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all. They just seem delighted by the flawed people around them. They just recognize what needs doing and they do it.

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They make you feel funnier and smarter when you speak with them. They move through different social classes not even aware, it seems, that they are doing so. After you've known them for a while it occurs to you that you've never heard them boast, you've never seen them self-righteous or doggedly certain. They aren't dropping little hints of their own distinctiveness and accomplishments.

They have not led lives of conflict-free tranquillity, but have struggled toward maturity. They have gone some way toward solving life's essential problem, which is that, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it, "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart."

These are the people who have built a strong inner character, who have achieved a certain depth. In these people, at the end of this struggle, the climb to success has surrendered to the struggle to deepen the soul. After a life of seeking balance, Adam I bows down before Adam II. These are the people we are looking for.

ORDERED LOVE

AUGUSTINE WAS BORN IN THE YEAR 354 IN THE TOWN OF THAGASTE in what is now Algeria. He was born at the tail end of the Roman Empire, at a time when the empire was collapsing but still seemed eternal. His hometown was near the edge of that empire, two hundred miles from the coast, in a culture that was a messy mix of Roman paganism and fervent African Christianity. He lived, for the first half of his life, caught in the tension between his personal ambitions and his spiritual nature.

Augustine's father, Patricius, a minor town counselor and tax collector, headed a family that was somewhere in the upper end of the middle class. Patricius was materialistic and spiritually inert, and he hoped that his brilliant son would one day have the glittering career he had missed out on. One day he saw his pubescent son in the public baths and wounded Augustine with a lewd crack about his pubic hair or penis size or something. "He saw in me only hollow things," Augustine would write, dismissively.

Augustine's mother, Monica, has always riveted the attention of historians—and psychoanalysts. On the one hand, she was an earthy, unlettered woman, raised in a church that was dismissed, at the time, as primitive. She devoutly attended services each morning, ate meals on the tombs of the dead, and consulted her dreams as omens and guides. On the other hand, she had a strength of personality, and a relentlessness in her convictions about her views, that makes your jaw

drop. She was a force in the community, a peacemaker, above gossip, formidable, and dignified. She was capable, as the magnificent biographer Peter Brown notes, of dismissing the unworthy with biting sarcasm.¹

Monica ran the household. She corrected her husband's errors, waited out and rebuked his infidelities. Her love for her son, and her hunger to run his life, were voracious and at times greedy and unspiritual. Much more than most mothers, Augustine admitted, she longed to have him by her side and under her dominion. She warned him away from other women who might snare him into marriage. She organized her adult life around the care of his soul, doting on him when he tended toward her version of Christianity, weeping and exploding in a delirium of rage when he deviated. When Augustine joined a philosophic sect she disapproved of, she banished him from her presence.

At twenty-eight, when Augustine was already a successful adult, he had to trick her so he could get on a boat to leave Africa. He told her that he was going to the harbor to see a friend off and then slipped aboard a vessel with his mistress and son. As he sailed away, he saw her weeping and gesticulating on the shore, consumed, as he put it, by "a frenzy of grief." She followed him to Europe, of course, prayed for him, got rid of his mistress, and set up an arranged marriage with a ten-year-old heiress that she hoped would force Augustine to receive the rites of baptism.

Augustine understood the possessive nature of her love, but he could not dismiss her. He was a sensitive boy, terrified of her disapproval, but even in adulthood he was proud of her spirit and commonsense wisdom. He was delighted when he found she could keep conversational pace with scholars and philosophers. He understood that she suffered for him even more than he suffered for himself, or more than she could suffer for herself. "I have no words to express the love she had for me; and how much more anguish she was now suffering during the pangs of birth for my spiritual state than when she had given birth to me physically."² Through it all, she would love him fiercely and stalk his soul. For all her overbearing harshness, some of the sweetest moments of Augustine's life were moments of reconciliation and spiritual communion with his mother.

Ambition

AUGUSTINE WAS A SICKLY CHILD WHO GREW SERIOUSLY ILL WITH CHEST pains at seven and looked prematurely old in middle age. As a school-boy, he was brilliant and sensitive, but uncooperative. He was bored by the curriculum and detested the beatings that were a constant feature of school discipline. When possible, he skipped school to see the pagan bear fights and cockfights that were put on in the town arena.

Even as a young boy, Augustine was caught between the competing ideals of the classical world and the Judeo-Christian world. As Matthew Arnold writes in *Culture and Anarchy*, the primary idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of consciousness, while the governing idea of what he calls Hebraism is strictness of conscience.

That is to say, a person in a Hellenistic frame of mind wants to see things as they really are and explore the excellence and good she finds in the world. A person in this frame of mind approaches the world in a spirit of flexibility and playfulness. "To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature."³ The Hellenistic mind has an "aerial ease, clearness and radiancy." It is filled with "sweetness and light."

Hebraism, by contrast, "seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the universal order, and rivets itself, one may say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observance of them."⁴ So while the person in a Hellenistic frame of mind is afraid of missing any part of life and is really directing her own life, the person in a Hebraic frame of mind is focusing on the higher truth and is loyal to an immortal order: "Self-conquest, self-devotion, the following not of our own individual will, but the will of God, obedience, is the fundamental idea of this form."⁵

The person in the Hebraic frame of mind, unlike the Hellenist, is not at ease in this world. She is conscious of sin, the forces in herself that impede the passage to perfection. As Arnold puts it, "To a world stricken with moral enervation, Christianity offered the spectacle of an inspired self-sacrifice; to men who refused themselves nothing, it shows one who refused himself everything."⁶

Augustine lived nominally under the rule of the semidivine emperors, who had by then become remote, awe-inspiring figures and were celebrated by courtly sycophants as "Ever-Victorious" and "Restorers of the World."⁷ He was taught the philosophy of the Stoics, with their ideal lives of calm, emotion-suppressing self-sufficiency. He memorized Virgil and Cicero. "My ears were inflamed for Pagan myths, and the more they were scratched the more they itched," he would later recall.⁸

By the time he hit his teenage years, Augustine seems to have established himself as something of a golden boy. "I was called a promising lad," he recalled. He attracted the attention of a local grandee, Romanus, who agreed to sponsor the young man's education and send him away to centers of learning. Augustine hungered for recognition and admiration and hoped to fulfill the classical dream of living forever in the mouths of posterity.

At seventeen, Augustine went to Carthage to continue his studies. In his spiritual memoir, the *Confessions*, he makes it sound as if he was consumed by lust. "I came to Carthage," he says of his student days, "where the cauldron of illicit loves leapt and boiled about me." Augustine's presence didn't exactly calm things down. He describes himself as a tumultuous young man, his blood boiling with passions, lusts, jealousies, and desires:

I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love, and from the depths of my need, I hated myself. . . . What I needed most was to love and to be loved, but most of all when I obtained the enjoyment of the body of the person who loved me . . . I rushed headlong into love, eager to be caught. . . . Happily I wrapped those painful bonds around me, and sure enough I would be lashed with red-hot iron rods of jealousy, by suspicion and fear, by bursts of anger and quarrels.

Augustine was apparently history's most high-maintenance boyfriend. His language is precise. He is not in love with another human being, he is in love with the prospect of being loved. It's all about him. And in his memoir he describes how his disordered lusts fed on themselves. In book 8 of the *Confessions*, Augustine includes an almost clinical description of how his emotional neediness was an addiction:

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I was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links . . . connected one to another . . . a harsh bondage held me under constraint.

Augustine was forced to confront, in a very direct way, the fact that he was divided against himself. Part of him sought the shallow pleasures of the world. Part of him disapproved of these desires. His desires were out of harmony with his other faculties. He can imagine a purer way of living, but can't get there. He was restless, unaligned.

In this most fevered writing, Augustine makes it sound like he was some sort of sex-obsessed Caligula. And throughout the centuries many people have read the *Confessions* and concluded that Augustine was really just writing about sex. In fact, it's not exactly clear how wild Augustine really was. If you look at what he accomplished during these years, he seems to have been a studious and responsible young man. He excelled at university. He became a teacher in Carthage and rose up the ladder from one good job to the next. Then he moved to Rome and eventually got a job in Milan, the real center of power, at the court of the emperor Valentinian II. He had a common-law wife, conventional in that day, for about fifteen years. He had one child by this woman and did not cheat on her. He studied Plato and Cicero. His sins, such as they were, seem to have consisted mostly of going to the theater to see plays, and occasionally checking out the women he saw at church. All in all, he seems like a contemporary version of a successful young Ivy Leaguer, a sort of normal meritocrat of the late Roman Empire. In Adam I career terms, Augustine's life was something of a model of upward mobility.

As a young man, Augustine belonged to a strict philosophic sect called the Manichees. This was a little like joining the Communist Party in Russia at the start of the twentieth century. It was joining a group of smart, committed young people who believed they had come into possession of an all-explaining truth.

Manichaeans believed the world is divided into a Kingdom of Light and a Kingdom of Darkness. They believed there is an eternal conflict

between all that is good and all that is evil, and that in the course of this conflict, bits of good get trapped within the darkness. Pure spirit can be trapped in mortal flesh.

As a logical system, Manichaeism has several advantages. God, who is on the side of pure good, is protected from the faintest suspicion that he is responsible for evil.⁹ Manichaeism also helps excuse individuals from the evils they perform: it wasn't me, I am essentially good, it was the Kingdom of Darkness working through me. As Augustine put it, "It gave joy to my pride to be above guilt, and when I did an evil deed, not to confess that I myself had done it." Finally, once you accepted its premises, Manichaeism was a very rigorous logical system. Everything in the universe could be explained through neat rational steps.

The Manichaeans found it easy to feel superior to everyone else. Plus, they had fun together. Augustine would remember "conversation and laughter and mutual deferrings; shared readings of sweetly phrased books, facetious alternating with serious, heated arguing, to spice our general agreement with dissent; teaching and being taught by turns; the sadness at anyone's absence, and the joy of return."¹⁰ They also practiced asceticism to purify themselves of evil matter. They were celibate and ate only certain foods. They avoided contact with the flesh as much as possible and were served by "hearers" (including Augustine) who did soiling chores for them.

Classical culture placed great emphasis on winning debates, on demonstrations of rhetorical prowess. Augustine, living a life more of head than heart, found he could use Manichaean arguments to easily win debates: "I always used to win more arguments than was good for me, debating with unskilled Christians who had tried to stand up for their faith in argument."¹¹

Inner Chaos

ALL IN ALL, AUGUSTINE WAS LIVING THE ROMAN DREAM. BUT AUGUSTINE was unhappy. Inside he felt fragmented. His spiritual energies had nothing to attach to. They dissipated, evaporated. His Adam II life was a mess. "I was tossed to and fro," he writes in the *Confessions*, "I poured myself out, was made to flow away in all directions and boiled off."

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At a phenomenally young age, he won the ultimate mark of success. He was given a chance to speak before the imperial court. He found that he was a mere peddler of empty words. He told lies and people loved him for it so long as the lies were well crafted. There was nothing in his life he could truly love, nothing that deserved the highest form of devotion: "I was famished within, deprived of inner food." His hunger for admiration enslaved him rather than delighting him. He was at the whim of other people's facile opinions, sensitive to the slightest criticism, always looking for the next rung on the golden ladder. This frantic pursuit of the glittering vices killed tranquillity.

Augustine's feeling of fragmentation has its modern corollary in the way many contemporary young people are plagued by a frantic fear of missing out. The world has provided them with a superabundance of neat things to do. Naturally, they hunger to seize every opportunity and taste every experience. They want to grab all the goodies in front of them. They want to say yes to every product in the grocery store. They are terrified of missing out on anything that looks exciting. But by not renouncing any of them they spread themselves thin. What's worse, they turn themselves into goodie seekers, greedy for every experience and exclusively focused on self. If you live in this way, you turn into a shrewd tactician, making a series of cautious semicommitments without really surrendering to some larger purpose. You lose the ability to say a hundred noes for the sake of one overwhelming and fulfilling yes.

Augustine found himself feeling increasingly isolated. If you organize your life around your own wants, other people become objects for the satisfaction of your own desires. Everything is coldly instrumental. Just as a prostitute is rendered into an object for the satisfaction of orgasm, so a professional colleague is rendered into an object for the purpose of career networking, a stranger is rendered into an object for the sake of making a sale, a spouse is turned into an object for the purpose of providing you with love.

We use the word "lust" to refer to sexual desire, but a broader, better meaning is selfish desire. A true lover delights to serve his beloved. But lust is all incoming. The person in lust has a void he needs filled by others. Because he is unwilling to actually serve others and build a full reciprocal relationship, he never fills the emotional emptiness inside. Lust begins with a void and ends with a void.

At one point Augustine called his fifteen-year relationship with his lower-class common-law wife "a mere bargain of lustful love." Still, their relationship could not have been entirely empty. It is hard to imagine a person who lived at Augustine's intense emotional register taking a fifteen-year intimate relationship lightly. He loved the child they had together. He indirectly celebrated his wife's steadfastness in a tract titled "What Is Good in Marriage." When Monica intervened and got rid of the woman so Augustine could marry a rich girl of an appropriate social class, he seems to have suffered: "She was an obstacle to my marriage, the woman I lived with for so long was torn out of my side. My heart, to which she had been grafted, was lacerated, wounded, shedding blood."

Augustine sacrificed this woman for his social standing. The unnamed woman was sent back to Africa without her son, where we are told she vowed to remain celibate the rest of her life. The person chosen to be Augustine's official wife was just ten years old, two years below the legal age of marriage, so Augustine took another concubine to satisfy his cravings in the interim. This is what he was doing in all phases of his life at this point: shedding sacrificial commitments in favor of status and success.

One day, while walking in Milan, he observed a beggar who had clearly just finished a good meal and had a few drinks. The man was joking and joyful. Augustine realized that though he himself toiled and worked all day, fraught with anxieties, the beggar, who did none of these things, was happier than he was. Maybe he was suffering because he was shooting for higher goals, he considered. No, not really, he was seeking the same earthly pleasures as that beggar, but he was finding none of them.

By his late twenties Augustine had become thoroughly alienated. Here he was living an arduous life and it was providing him with none of the nourishment he needed. He had desires that didn't lead to happiness and yet he still followed his desires. What on earth was going on?

Self-Knowledge

AUGUSTINE RESPONDED TO THIS CRISIS BY LOOKING WITHIN HIMSELF. You'd think that somebody who has become appalled by his own self-centeredness would immediately head in the direction of self-forgetfulness. His advice would be simple: ignore yourself, pay attention to other people. But Augustine's first step was to undertake an almost scientific expedition into his own mind. It is hard to think of another character in Western history up to that time who did such a thorough excavation of his own psyche.

Looking in, he saw a vast universe beyond his own control. He sees himself with a depth and complexity almost no one had observed before: "Who can map out the various forces at play in one soul, the different kinds of love. . . . Man is a great depth, O Lord; you number his hairs . . . but the hairs of his head are easier by far to count than his feelings, the movements of his heart." The vast internal world is dappled and ever-changing. He perceives the dance of small perceptions and senses great depths below the level of awareness.

Augustine was fascinated, for example, by memory. Sometimes painful memories pop into the mind unbidden. He was amazed by the mind's ability to transcend time and space. "Even while I dwell in darkness and silence, in my memory I can produce colors if I will. . . . Yea, I discern the breath of the lilies from violets, though smelling nothing. . . ." ¹² The very scope of a person's memories amazed him:

Great is the force of memory, excessive great, O my God; a large and boundless chamber; whoever sounded the bottom thereof? Yet is this a power of mine and belongs to my nature; nor do I myself comprehend all that I am. Therefore is the mind too straight to contain itself. And where should that be, which containeth not itself? Is it without it and not within? And how then does it not comprehend itself? A wonderful admiration surprises me, amazement seizes me upon this.

At least two great conclusions arose from this internal expedition. First, Augustine came to realize that though people are born with magnificent qualities, original sin had perverted their desires. Up until

this point in his life Augustine had fervently desired certain things, like fame and status. These things didn't make him happy. And yet he kept on desiring them.

Left to ourselves, we often desire the wrong things. Whether it's around the dessert tray or in the late-night bar, we know we should choose one thing but end up choosing another. As the Bible says in Romans, "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do."

What sort of mysterious creature is a human being, Augustine mused, who can't carry out his own will, who knows his long-term interest but pursues short-term pleasure, who does so much to screw up his own life? This led to the conclusion that people are a problem to themselves. We should regard ourselves with distrust: "I greatly fear my hidden parts,"¹³ he wrote.

Small and Petty Corruptions

IN THE *CONFESSIONS*, AUGUSTINE USED AN IDLE TEENAGE PRANK FROM HIS own past to illustrate this phenomenon. One boring evening when he was sixteen, Augustine was hanging out with his buddies and they decided to steal some pears from a nearby orchard. They didn't need the pears. They weren't hungry. They weren't particularly nice pears. They just stole them wantonly and threw them to some pigs for sport.

Looking back, Augustine was astounded by the pointlessness and the tawdriness of the act. "I lusted to thief, and did it, compelled by no hunger, nor poverty, but through a cloyedness of well-doing, and pamperedness of iniquity. . . . It was foul, and I loved it; I loved to perish, I loved mine own fault, not that for which I was faulty, but my fault itself. Foul soul, falling from Thy firmament to utter destruction; not seeking aught through the shame, but the shame itself."

Casual readers of the *Confessions* have always wondered why Augustine got so worked up over a childhood prank. I used to think that the theft of the pears was a stand-in for some more heinous crime the teenage boys committed that night, like molesting a girl or some such thing. But for Augustine, the very small purposelessness of the crime is part of its rotten normality. We commit such small perversities all the time, as part of the complacent order of life.

His larger point is that the tropism toward wrong love, toward sin, is at the center of the human personality. People not only sin, we have a weird fascination with sin. If we hear that some celebrity has committed some outrageous scandal, we're kind of disappointed when it turns out the rumor isn't really true. If you leave sweet children to their own devices with nothing to do, before long they will find a way to get into trouble. (The British writer G. K. Chesterton once observed that the reality of sin can be seen on a lovely Sunday afternoon when bored and restless children start torturing the cat.)

Even sweet institutions, like camaraderie and friendship, can be distorted if they are unattached to a higher calling. The story of the stealing of the pears is also the story of a rotten friendship. Augustine realizes he probably wouldn't have done it if he had been alone. It was the desire for camaraderie, for mutual admiration, that egged the boys on into doing what they did. We so fear exclusion from the group that we are willing to do things that we would find unconscionable in other circumstances. When unattached to the right ends, communities can be more barbarous than individuals.

God's Presence

THE SECOND LARGE OBSERVATION THAT FLOWS FROM AUGUSTINE'S INTERNAL excavation is that the human mind does not contain itself, but stretches out toward infinity. It's not only rottenness Augustine finds within, but also intimations of perfection, sensations of transcendence, emotions and thoughts and feelings that extend beyond the finite and into another realm. If you wanted to capture Augustine's attitude here, you might say that his thoughts enter and embrace the material world, but then fly up and surpass it.

As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, Augustine's study of memory led him to the "understanding that the human spirit in its depth and heights reaches into eternity and that this vertical dimension is more important for the understanding of man than merely his rational capacity for forming general concepts."¹⁴

The path inward leads upward. A person goes into himself but finds himself directed toward God's infinity. He senses the nature of God and his eternal creation even in his own mind, a small piece of cre-

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ation. Centuries later, C. S. Lewis would make a related observation: "In deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify itself with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our minds, proclaims itself purely objective." We are all formed within that eternal objective order. Our lives cannot be understood individually, abstracted from it. Sin—the desire to steal the pears—seems to flow from the past through human nature and each individual. At the same time, the longing for holiness, the striving upward, the desire to live a life of goodness and meaning, are also universal.

The result is that people can understand themselves only by looking at forces that transcend themselves. Human life points beyond itself. Augustine looks inside himself and makes contact with certain universal moral sentiments. He is simultaneously aware that he can conceive of perfection, but it is also far beyond his powers to attain. There must be a higher power, an eternal moral order.

As Niebuhr put it, "man is an individual but he is not self-sufficing. The law of his nature is love, a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine center and source of his life. This law is violated when man seeks to make himself the center and source of his own life."

Reform

AUGUSTINE BEGAN TO REFORM HIS LIFE. HIS FIRST STEP WAS TO QUIT THE Manichees. It no longer seemed true to him that the world was neatly divided into forces of pure good and pure evil. Instead, each virtue comes with its own vice—self-confidence with pride, honesty with brutality, courage with recklessness, and so on. The ethicist and theologian Lewis Smedes, expressing an Augustinian thought, describes the mottled nature of our inner world:

Our inner lives are not partitioned like day and night, with pure light on one side of us and total darkness on the other. Mostly, our souls are shadowed places; we live at the border where our dark sides block our light and throw a shadow over

our interior places. . . . We cannot always tell where our light ends and our shadow begins or where our shadow ends and our darkness begins.¹⁵

Augustine also came to believe that the Manichees were infected with pride. Having a closed, all-explaining model of reality appealed to their vanity; it gave them the illusion that they had intellectually mastered all things. But it made them cold to mystery and unable to humble themselves before the complexities and emotions that, as Augustine put it, "make the heart deep." They possessed reason, but no wisdom.

Augustine hung between worlds. He wanted to live a truthful life. But he wasn't ready to give up his career, or sex, or some of his worldly pursuits. He wanted to use the old methods to achieve better outcomes. That is to say, he was going to start with the core assumption that had always been the basis for his ambitious meritocratic life: that you are the prime driver of your life. The world is malleable enough to be shaped by you. To lead a better life you just have to work harder, or use more willpower, or make better decisions.

This is more or less how many people try to rearrange their life today. They attack it like a homework assignment or a school project. They step back, they read self-help books like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. They learn the techniques for greater self-control. They even establish a relationship with God in the same way they would go after a promotion or an advanced degree—by conquest: by reading certain books, attending services regularly, practicing spiritual disciplines such as regular prayer, doing their spiritual homework.

Pride

BUT EVENTUALLY AUGUSTINE CAME TO BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN'T GRADUALLY reform yourself. He concluded that you can't really lead a good life by using old methods. That's because the method is the problem. The crucial flaw in his old life was the belief that he could be the driver of his own journey. So long as you believe that you are the cap-

tain of your own life, you will be drifting farther and farther from the truth.

You can't lead a good life by steering yourself, in the first place, because you do not have the capacity to do so. The mind is such a vast, unknown cosmos you can never even know yourself by yourself. Your emotions are so changeable and complex you can't order your emotional life by yourself. Your appetites are so infinite you can never satisfy them on your own. The powers of self-deception are so profound you are rarely fully honest with yourself.

Furthermore, the world is so complex, and fate so uncertain, that you can never really control other people or the environment effectively enough to be master of your own destiny. Reason is not powerful enough to build intellectual systems or models to allow you to accurately understand the world around you or anticipate what is to come. Your willpower is not strong enough to successfully police your desires. If you really did have that kind of power, then New Year's resolutions would work. Diets would work. The bookstores wouldn't be full of self-help books. You'd need just one and that would do the trick. You'd follow its advice, solve the problems of living, and the rest of the genre would become obsolete. The existence of more and more self-help books is proof that they rarely work.

The problem, Augustine came to believe, is that if you think you can organize your own salvation you are magnifying the very sin that keeps you from it. To believe that you can be captain of your own life is to suffer the sin of pride.

What is pride? These days the word "pride" has positive connotations. It means feeling good about yourself and the things associated with you. When we use it negatively, we think of the arrogant person, someone who is puffed up and egotistical, boasting and strutting about. But that is not really the core of pride. That is just one way the disease of pride presents itself.

By another definition, pride is building your happiness around your accomplishments, using your work as the measure of your worth. It is believing that you can arrive at fulfillment on your own, driven by your own individual efforts.

Pride can come in bloated form. This is the puffed-up Donald Trump style of pride. This person wants people to see visible proof of

his superiority. He wants to be on the VIP list. In conversation, he boasts, he brags. He needs to see his superiority reflected in other people's eyes. He believes that this feeling of superiority will eventually bring him peace.

That version is familiar. But there are other proud people who have low self-esteem. They feel they haven't lived up to their potential. They feel unworthy. They want to hide and disappear, to fade into the background and nurse their own hurts. We don't associate them with pride, but they are still, at root, suffering from the same disease. They are still yoking happiness to accomplishment; it's just that they are giving themselves a D- rather than an A+. They tend to be just as solipsistic, and in their own way as self-centered, only in a self-pitying and isolating way rather than in an assertive and bragging way.

One key paradox of pride is that it often combines extreme self-confidence with extreme anxiety. The proud person often appears self-sufficient and egotistical but is really touchy and unstable. The proud person tries to establish self-worth by winning a great reputation, but of course this makes him utterly dependent on the gossipy and unstable crowd for his own identity. The proud person is competitive. But there are always other people who might do better. The most ruthlessly competitive person in the contest sets the standard that all else must meet or get left behind. Everybody else has to be just as monomaniacally driven to success. One can never be secure. As Dante put it, the "ardor to outshine / Burned in my bosom with a kind of rage."

Hungry for exaltation, the proud person has a tendency to make himself ridiculous. Proud people have an amazing tendency to turn themselves into buffoons, with a comb-over that fools nobody, with golden bathroom fixtures that impress nobody, with name-dropping stories that inspire nobody. Every proud man, Augustine writes, "heeds himself, and he who pleases himself seems great to himself. But he who pleases himself pleases a fool, for he himself is a fool when he is pleasing himself."¹⁶

Pride, the minister and writer Tim Keller has observed, is unstable because other people are absentmindedly or intentionally treating the proud man's ego with less reverence than he thinks it deserves. He continually finds that his feelings are hurt. He is perpetually putting up a front. The self-cultivator spends more energy trying to display

the fact that he is happy—posting highlight reel Facebook photos and all the rest—than he does actually being happy.

Augustine suddenly came to realize that the solution to his problem would come only after a transformation more fundamental than any he had previously entertained, a renunciation of the very idea that he could be the source of his own solution.

Elevation

AUGUSTINE LATER WROTE THAT GOD SPRINKLED BITTERNESS AND DISCONTENT over his life to draw him toward God. "The greater I got in age, the worse I got in emptiness, as I could not conceive of any substance except the kind I saw with these eyes." Or, as he most famously put it, "our hearts are restless until we rest in Thee."

Augustine's pain during his years of ambition, at least as he describes it later, is not just the pain of someone who is self-centered and unstable. It is the pain of someone who is self-centered and unstable but who has a deep sensation that there is a better way to live, if only he could figure out what it is. As other converts have put it, they are so rooted in God that even when they haven't found God they feel the lack. They are aware of a divine absence, which picks at them from the inside, and that absence is evidence of a presence. Augustine had an inkling of what he needed in order to feel peace, but still, perversely, was unmotivated to actually travel there.

To move from a fragmentary life to a cohesive one, from an opportunistic life to a committed life, it is necessary to close off certain possibilities. Augustine, like most of us in this situation, didn't want to close his options and renounce the things that made him feel good. His natural inclination was to think his anxieties could be solved if he got more of what he desired, not less. So he hung on an emotional precipice between a religious life he was afraid to sacrifice for and a secular one he detested but would not renounce. He commanded himself to decenter himself and put God at the center of his life. But he refused to obey himself.

He worried about his reputation. He worried he'd have to give up sex, sensing that for him, celibacy would be a necessary part of a religiously devoted life. "This controversy in my heart was self against

self only." Looking back, he recalled, "I was in love with the idea of the happy life, but I feared to find it in its true place and I sought for it by running away from it."

His general solution was to delay. Make me virtuous—but not yet.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine paints the scene when the delay finally ended. He was sitting in a garden talking with a friend, Alypius, who told him some stories about monks in Egypt who gave up everything to serve God. Augustine was amazed. The people who were not part of the elite educational system were out doing amazing things while the graduates of that system lived for themselves. "What ails us?" Augustine cried. "The unlearned start up and take heaven by force and we, with this our learning, but without heart, wallow in flesh and blood."

In this fever of doubt and self-reproach, Augustine stood up and strode away while Alypius gazed on in stunned silence. Augustine began pacing around the garden, and Alypius got up and followed him. Augustine felt his bones crying out to end this self-divided life, to stop turning and tossing this way and that. He tore at his hair, beat his forehead, locked his fingers and hunched over, clasping his knee. It seemed as if God was beating on his insides, inflicting a "severe mercy," redoubling the lashes of fear and shame that afflicted him. "Be it done now, be it done now," he cried to himself.

But his worldly desires would not give up so easily. Thoughts jumped into his head. It was as if they were plucking at his garments. "Are you going to cast us off? You'll never experience our pleasures ever again?" Augustine hesitated, wondering, "Do I really think I can live without these pleasures?"

Then there appeared in his mind a thought, the ideal of dignified chastity and self-control. In the *Confessions*, he dresses up this thought in metaphorical terms, as a vision of a woman, Lady Continence. He does not describe her as an ascetic, puritanical goddess. On the contrary, she is an earthy, fecund woman. She's not renouncing joy and sensuality; she's offering better versions. She describes all the young men and women who have already renounced the pleasures of the world for the pleasures of the faith. "Can't you do what they did?" she asks. "Why are you standing apart in yourself?"

Augustine blushed, still undecided. "There arose a mighty storm, bringing a mighty shower of tears." He got up and walked away from

Alypius again, wanting to be alone with his weeping. This time Alypius didn't follow but let Augustine go. Augustine cast himself down under a fig tree, giving way to his tears. Then he heard a voice, which sounded like the voice of a boy or a girl from another house neighboring the garden. It said, "Take up and read. Take up and read." Augustine felt a sense of immediate resolve. He opened up a nearby Bible and read the first passage on which his eyes fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye in the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence."

Augustine had no need to read any further. He felt a light flooding his heart and erasing every shadow. He felt a sudden turning of his will, a sudden desire to renounce worldly, finite pleasures and to live for Christ. It felt all the sweeter to be without shallow sweet things. What he had once been so terrified of losing was now a delight to dismiss.

Naturally, he went to Monica straightaway and told her what had happened. We can imagine her screams of joy, her praises to God for answering a lifetime of prayers. As Augustine put it, "thou had convertest me unto Thyself. . . . And Thou didst convert her mourning into joy, much more plentiful than she had desired, and in a much more precious and purer way than she required, by having grandchildren of my body."

The scene in the garden is not really a conversion scene. Augustine was already a Christian of a sort. After the garden he does not immediately have a fully formed view of what a life in Christ means. The scene in the garden is an elevation scene. Augustine says no to one set of desires and pleasures and rises to a higher set of joys and pleasures.

Agency

THIS ELEVATION IS NOT ONLY A RENUNCIATION OF SEX—THOUGH IN AUGUSTINE'S case it seemed to involve that. It's a renunciation of the whole ethos of self-cultivation. The basic formula of the Adam I world is that effort produces reward. If you work hard, play by the rules, and take care of things yourself, you can be the cause of your own good life.

Augustine came to conclude that this all was incomplete. He didn't

withdraw from the world. He spent the rest of his life as a politically active bishop, engaging in brutal and sometimes vicious public controversies. But his public work and effort was nestled in a total surrender. He came to conclude that the way to inner joy is not through agency and action, it's through surrender and receptivity to God. The point, according to this view, is to surrender, or at least suppress, your will, your ambition, your desire to achieve victory on your own. The point is to acknowledge that God is the chief driver here and that he already has a plan for you. God already has truths he wants you to live by.

What's more, God has already justified your existence. You may have the feeling that you are on trial in this life, that you have to work and achieve and make your mark to earn a good verdict. Some days you provide evidence for the defense that you are a worthwhile person. Some days you provide evidence for the prosecution that you are not. But as Tim Keller put it, in Christian thought, the trial is already over. The verdict came in before you even began your presentation. That's because Jesus stood trial for you. He took the condemnation that you deserve.

Imagine the person you love most in the world getting nailed to wood as penalty for the sins you yourself committed. Imagine the emotions that would go through your mind as you watched that. This is, in the Christian mind, just a miniature version of the sacrifice Jesus made for you. As Keller puts it, "God imputes Christ's perfect performance to us as if it were our own, and adopts us into His family."¹⁷

The problem with the willful mindset is, as Jennifer Herdt put it in her book *Putting On Virtue*, "God wants to give us a gift, and we want to buy it."¹⁸ We continually want to earn salvation and meaning through work and achievement. But salvation and meaning are actually won, in this way of living, when you raise the white flag of surrender and allow grace to flood your soul.

The implied posture here is one of submission, arms high, wide open and outstretched, face tilted up, eyes gazing skyward, calm with patient but passionate waiting. Augustine wants you to adopt this sort of surrendered posture. That posture flows from an awareness of need, of one's own insufficiency. Only God has the power to order your inner world, not you. Only God has the power to orient your desires and reshape your emotions, not you.¹⁹

This posture of receptiveness, for Augustine and much Christian

thought since, starts with the feeling of smallness and sinfulness one gets next to the awesome presence of God. Humility comes with daily reminders of your own brokenness. Humility relieves you of the awful stress of trying to be superior all the time. It inverts your attention and elevates the things we tend to look down on.

Throughout his early life, Augustine had been climbing upward, getting out of Thagaste, moving to Carthage, Rome, and Milan in search of more prestigious circles, more brilliant company. He lived, as we do today, in a thoroughly class-driven society, striving upward. But in Christianity, at least in its ideal form, the sublime is not in the prestigious and the lofty but in the everyday and the lowly. It is in the washing of feet, not in triumphal arches. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled. Whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. One goes down in order to rise up. As Augustine put it, "Where there's humility, there's majesty; where there's weakness, there's might; where there's death, there's life. If you want to get these things, don't disdain those."²⁰

The hero of this sort of humble life is not averse to the pleasures of praise, but the petty distinctions you earn for yourself do not really speak to your essential value as a human being. God possesses talents so all-encompassing that in relation to them, the difference between the most brilliant Nobel laureate and the dimmest nitwit are simply a matter of degree. Every soul is equal in the most important sense.

Augustinian Christianity demands a different tone of voice, not the peremptory command of the master to the servant but the posture of coming in under, coming to each relationship from below, and hoping to serve upward. It's not that worldly achievement and public acclaim are automatically bad, it's just that they are won on a planet that is just a resting place for the soul and not our final destination. Success here, acquired badly, can make ultimate success less likely, and that ultimate success is not achieved through competition with others.

It's not quite right to say that Augustine had a low view of human nature. He believed that each individual is made in God's image and possesses a dignity that merits the suffering and death of Jesus. It's more accurate to say that he believed human beings are incapable of living well on their own, as autonomous individuals—incapable of ordering their desires on their own. They can find that order, and that proper love, only by submitting their will to God's. It's not that human

beings are pathetic; it's just that they will be restless until they rest in Him.

Grace

AUGUSTINE'S THOUGHT, AND MUCH CHRISTIAN TEACHING GENERALLY, challenges the code of the self-cultivator in one more crucial way. In Augustine's view, people do not get what they deserve; life would be hellish if they did. Instead people get much more than they deserve. God offers us grace, which is his unmerited love. God's protection and care comes precisely because you do not deserve it and cannot earn it. Grace doesn't come to you because you've performed well on your job or even made great sacrifices as a parent or as a friend. Grace comes to you as part of the gift of being created.

One of the things you have to do in order to receive grace is to renounce the idea that you can earn it. You have to renounce the meritocratic impulse that you can win a victory for God and get rewarded for your effort. Then you have to open up to it. You do not know when grace will come to you. But people who are open and sensitive to it testify that they have felt grace at the oddest and at the most needed times.

Paul Tillich puts it this way in his collection of essays, *Shaking the Foundations*:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. . . . It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do

anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.*" If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.²¹

Those of us in mainstream culture are used to the idea that people get loved because they are kind, or funny, or attractive, or smart, or attentive. It's surprisingly difficult to receive a love that feels unearned. But once you accept the fact that you are accepted, there is a great desire to go meet this love and reciprocate this gift.

If you are passionately in love with a person, you naturally seek to delight her all the time. You want to buy her presents. You want to stand outside her window singing ridiculous songs. This is a replica of the way those who feel touched by grace seek to delight God. They take pleasure in tasks that might please him. They work tirelessly at tasks that they think might glorify him. The desire to rise up and meet God's love can arouse mighty energies.

And as people rise up and seek to meet God, their desires slowly change. In prayer, people gradually reform their desires so that more and more they want the things they believe will delight God rather than the things they used to think would delight themselves.

The ultimate conquest of self, in this view, is not won by self-discipline, or an awful battle within self. It is won by going out of self, by establishing a communion with God and by doing the things that feel natural in order to return God's love.

This is the process that produces an inner transformation. One day you turn around and notice that everything inside has been realigned. The old loves no longer thrill. You love different things and are oriented in different directions. You have become a different sort of person. You didn't get this way simply by following this or that moral code, or adopting a drill sergeant's discipline or certain habits. You did it instead because you reordered your loves, and as Augustine says again and again, you become what you love.

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Humble Ambition

WE HAVE ARRIVED, THEREFORE, AT A DIFFERENT THEORY OF MOTIVATION. To recapitulate the Augustinian process, it starts with the dive inside to see the vastness of the inner cosmos. The inward dive leads outward, toward an awareness of external truth and God. That leads to humility as one feels small in contrast to the almighty. That leads to a posture of surrender, of self-emptying, as one makes space for God. That opens the way for you to receive God's grace. That gift arouses an immense feeling of gratitude, a desire to love back, to give back and to delight. That in turn awakens vast energies. Over the centuries many people have been powerfully motivated to delight God. This motivation has been as powerful as the other great motivations, the desire for money, fame, and power.

The genius of this conception is that as people become more dependent on God, their capacity for ambition and action increases. Dependency doesn't breed passivity; it breeds energy and accomplishment.

The Old Loves

AFTER HIS "CONVERSION" IN THE GARDEN, AUGUSTINE DID NOT LIVE A tranquil, easy life. He enjoyed an initial burst of optimism, but then came the thudding realization that his own sinfulness was still there. His own false loves had not magically died away. As his biographer Peter Brown puts it, "The past can come very close: its powerful and complex emotions have only recently passed away; we can still feel their contours through the thin layer of new feeling that has grown over them."²²

When Augustine writes the *Confessions*, which is in some sense a memoir of his early manhood, he is not writing them as genial reminiscences. He is writing them as a necessary reassessment occasioned by hard times. As Brown writes, "He must base his future on a different view of himself: and how could he gain this view, except by reinterpreting just that part of his past, that had culminated in the conversion, on which he had until recently placed such high hopes?"²³

Augustine is reminding believers that the center of their lives is not

in themselves. The material world is beautiful and to be savored and enjoyed, but the pleasures of this world are most delicious when they are savored in the larger context of God's transcendent love. Augustine's prayers and meditations are filled with celebrations of the world that surpass the world. In one of his most beautiful meditations, for example, Augustine asks, "What do I love when I love my God?"

It is not physical beauty or temporal glory or the brightness of light dear to earthy eyes, or the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, or the gentle odor of flowers and ointments and perfumes, or manna or honey, or limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God—a light, voice, odor, food, embrace of my innerness, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That's what I love when I love my God.

This is living life in a broader context. As the theologian Lisa Fulham has put it, "Humility is a virtue of self-understanding in context, acquired by the practice of other centeredness."

Hush

AFTER HIS RENUNCIATION IN THE GARDEN, AUGUSTINE DRAGGED HIMSELF through the end of the school term, teaching the rhetoric he no longer believed in. Then he, his mother, his son, and a group of friends went to stay for five months at the villa of a Milanese friend of theirs whose wife was Christian. The villa was in Cassiciacum, twenty miles north of Milan. The party engaged in a series of colloquia, which have the feel of a group of scholars meditating together on deep things. Augustine was delighted that Monica had enough native smarts to keep up with and even lead the conversations. Then Augustine decided to return home to Africa, where he could live a secluded life of prayer and contemplation with his mother.

The party headed south—over the same road, biographers remind us, that his mistress had traveled when she had been dispatched two years before. They hit a military blockade and made it only as far as the town of Ostia. One day in Ostia, Augustine was looking out a window that overlooked a garden (many events in his life take place in gardens), and he was talking with his mother. Monica clearly had a sense by this time that death was coming to her. She was fifty-six.

Augustine describes their conversation, saying that together they experienced “the very highest delight of the earthly senses, in the very purest material light . . . in respect of the sweetness of that light.” But in the intimacy between mother and son, they began talking about God, and they “did by degrees pass through all things bodily, even the very heaven when sun and moon and stars shine upon the earth.” From these material things “we came to our own minds and went beyond them into the realm of pure spirit.”

In describing their talk, Augustine includes a long sentence that is hard to parse, but it includes, in some translations, the word “hushed” over and over—the tumult of the flesh was hushed, the waters and the air were hushed, all dreams and shallow visions were hushed, tongues were hushed, everything that passes away was hushed, the self was hushed in moving beyond the self into a sort of silence. Mother or son makes an exclamation: “We did not make ourselves, he who made us never passes away.” But after saying this, that voice, too, is hushed. And “He who made them, He alone speaks, not through men or women, but by himself.” And Augustine and Monica heard God’s word “not through any tongue of flesh, or Angels’ voices, not sound of thunder, nor in the dark riddle of similitude,” but they heard “his very Self.” And they sighed after a moment of pure understanding.

Augustine is describing here a perfect moment of elevation: hushed . . . hushed . . . hushed . . . hushed. All the clamors of the world slip into silence. Then a desire to praise the creator comes over them, but then even that praise is hushed amid the kenosis, the self-emptying. And then comes the infusing vision of eternal wisdom, what Augustine calls the “glad hidden depths.” One imagines mother and son lost in joy in this climactic encounter. After the years of tears and anger, control and escape, rupture and reconciliation, pursuit and manipulation, friendship and fighting, they finally achieve some sort

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of outward-facing union. They come together and dissolve together in contemplation of what they both now love.

Monica tells him, "Son, for mine own part I have no further delight in any thing in this life. . . . One thing there was for which I desired to linger for a while in this life, that I might see thee a Catholic Christian before I died. My God has done this for me more than abundantly."

TO BE HEALED IS to be broken open. The proper course is outward. C. S. Lewis observed that if you enter a party consciously trying to make a good impression, you probably won't end up making one. That happens only when you are thinking about the other people in the room. If you begin an art project by trying to be original, you probably won't be original.

And so it is with tranquillity. If you set out trying to achieve inner peace and a sense of holiness, you won't get it. That happens only obliquely, when your attention is a focused on something external. That happens only as a byproduct of a state of self-forgetfulness, when your energies are focused on something large.

For Augustine, that's the crucial change. Knowledge is not enough for tranquillity and goodness, because it doesn't contain the motivation to be good. Only love impels action. We don't become better because we acquire new information. We become better because we acquire better loves. We don't become what we know. Education is a process of love formation. When you go to a school, it should offer you new things to love.

A few days later, Monica came down with her fatal illness, which took only nine days to carry her off. She told Augustine that it was no longer important for her to be buried back in Africa, because no place was far from God. She told him that in all their tribulations she had never heard him utter a sharp word to her.

At the moment of her death, Augustine bent over and closed her eyes. "An innumerable sorrow flowed up into my heart and would have overflowed in tears." At that moment, Augustine, not even now fully renouncing classical Stoicism, felt he should exercise self-command and not give in to weeping. "But my eyes, under the mind's strong constraint, held back their flow and I stood dry-eyed. In that

struggle it went very hard with me. . . . Because I had now lost the great comfort of her, my soul was wounded and my very life torn asunder, for it had been one life—made of hers and mine together.”

Augustine's friends gathered around him, while he still tried to repress his grief: “For I was very much ashamed that these human emotions could have such power over me. . . . I felt a new grief at my grief and so was afflicted by a double sorrow.”

Augustine went to take a bath and soothe his self-division, then fell asleep and awoke feeling better. “And then, little by little, I began to recover my former feeling about Your handmaid, remembering how loving and devout was her conversation with me, of which I was thus suddenly deprived. And I found solace in weeping in Your sight both about her and for her, about myself and for myself.”

MONICA HAD ENTERED A world in which the Roman Empire dominated Europe and a rationalist philosophy dominated thinking. In his writing, Augustine uses her as an example of faith against pure rationalism, of spiritual relentlessness against worldly ambition. He would spend the rest of his life as a bishop fighting and preaching and writing, fighting and arguing. He achieved the immortality he sought in his youth, but he did it in an unexpected way. He started with the belief that he could control his own life. He had to renounce that, to sink down into a posture of openness and surrender. Then, after that retreat, he was open enough to receive grace, to feel gratitude and rise upward. This is life with an advance-retreat-advance shape. Life, death, and resurrection. Moving down to dependence to gain immeasurable height.