
Parting Words:

Augustine on Language and Loss

ERIKA KIDD

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence.

T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton V, Four Quartets*

INTRODUCTION

Augustine has a lot to say about what it means to be close; the whole of the *Confessions* can be read as a meditation on intimacy. His life's story, as he tells it there, is a story of his loves (and failures of love): for his mother, for friends, for his partner of many years, for his son. Augustine's confessions of love also turn out to be a story of the closeness and the distance between God and the soul; he offers his

During Spring 2017, ERIKA KIDD is the Patricia H. Imbesi Saint Augustine Fellow at Villanova University. She is also assistant professor of Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on pagan and Christian visions of happiness, Catholic visions of redemption, and Augustine's *Confessions*. She received her B.A. from Baylor University, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Villanova University. She publishes primarily on Augustine and the Augustinian tradition, and she has a long-time interest in those philosophers who write philosophy in the form of confession. Dr. Kidd would like to thank James DeMasi and the Braniff Graduate Student Association for their invitation to deliver a plenary address at the third annual Braniff Conference in the Liberal Arts; that address served as the first version of this article.

theology in a personal form, as a story of intimacy sought, overlooked, regained, and pursued. Throughout his great spiritual autobiography, in his reflections on his relations to both God and others, Augustine's heart is in the foreground of the scene and is given away, tangled up in affections. Intimacy, he tells us, is a brute fact about how we live with others.

Yet as Augustine writes about intimacy, he writes as well about interruptions to intimacy—death chief among them. Intimacy can be limited by spatial or affective distance, changed circumstances, or difference of view, but the mortality of the body poses an especially sharp limit on the closeness to which humans aspire. Augustine's confessions of vulnerability to created beauties—and the difficulty of wholeheartedly aligning his affections with God's own—are never more poignant than when reflecting on the deaths of those he loves. Thus the implicit question shadows Augustine's *Confessions*: Can you love a God who lets you lose what you love? Or, what kind of God weaves beauty and fragility together so closely?

Augustine titled his spiritual autobiography *Confessions*, and my reflections on intimacy in this essay presume we should take Augustine at his word—we ought to read his work as a work of *confession*. His text asks us to take notice of what tempts Augustine—and ourselves too. Yet it is worth remembering confession, for Augustine, is not merely the cataloguing of sin, but a practice of speaking with God. It is worth remembering too, as Augustine demonstrates from the very first page, his confessions are threefold: confessions of sin, confessions of faith, and confessions of praise. Sometimes the distinction looks easy to parse: Augustine's self-scrutiny about the theft of his neighbor's fruit with some friends is a confession of sin, while his longwinded prayers celebrating God's mercy are confessions of praise. But very often the categories cannot be sorted so simply. Acknowledgment of wrongdoing itself frequently becomes an offering of praise. A reflection on God's mercy is also an expression of faithful hope. Even an action that appears to be simple rebellion may turn out, upon reflection, to be a misguided way to seek God. Confession, for Augustine, is never just the bare attempt to distance himself from some offense against God better obliterated from memory.

So what does Augustine have to confess about intimacy? It is not that he sins by getting too close to created beings or by getting too far

away from God. Intimacy with God and intimacy with created beauties may sometimes look to be at odds, yet that is not the whole story Augustine has to tell. For now, I will simply say Augustine is keenly attuned to intimacy and its discontents: times and places where intimacy falls flat, where it is thinner than initially supposed, where it is sustained in ways other than those Augustine looked for. He reports the many times he was tempted to take distance for closeness or to seek a closeness that turns out to be alienating. Intimacy is a brute fact about our lives with others, but it is also unstable and prone to shatter—if it manages to take shape at all.

This essay unpacks the theme of intimacy and its discontents primarily within the *Confessions*. I begin with a prelude to set the tone: a short study of intimacy within Books 7 and 8, guided by two readers of Augustine who insist on reading the *Confessions* as confession. That insistence shapes the way those readers describe intimacy and its interruptions and provides two portraits of intimacy that will guide the rest of the essay. From there, I turn to three more passages from Augustine's autobiography: Augustine's Book 4 confessions about his friendship with a young man taken early from life, Augustine's Book 9 confessions about the events surrounding his mother Monica's passing from this life, and Augustine's much earlier work *De magistro*. Each scene includes what we might term "parting words," words spoken just before death. Each scene also dramatizes the difficulty of squaring an awareness of human mortality with the hope of remaining close to those we love. Attention to these poignant conversations sheds light on Augustine's vision of the blessed life, a form of intimacy that cannot be undone, despite the passing of created beauties. Parting, for Augustine, comes to mean not merely heartbreaking loss, but articulation—an articulation which gives shape to the meanings of the life Augustine shares with others.

My aim is to demonstrate how Augustine's memories of intimacy and alienation in his closest relationships inform his sense of who God is and what God cares about. Sometimes Augustine finds that a memory of intimacy holds him back from the embrace of an incomplete conception of God; sometimes he finds a memory reminds him of God's love for him (sometimes both). Augustine's vulnerability to created beauties is unsparingly confessed. Confessed too is Augustine's

perplexity over the question he wrestles with for many years, a question he puts to us, his readers, as well: What would it take to trust that the good we love derives from God?

PRELUDE

In a 2009 essay titled "*Consuetudo Carnalis* in Augustine's *Confessions*: Confessing Identity/Belonging to Difference," Kathleen Skerrett's insistence on reading Augustine's Book 7 vision of God *as* confession bears fruit in the form of a subtle meditation on Augustine's search for intimacy. As Book 7 opens, Augustine confesses he had been working with a merely material imagination for God. He had taken the Creator to be a kind of infinite sea within which creation was a vast sponge, soaked with God in every fiber. This poses a problem for the apparent reality of evil, as Augustine acknowledges: If God is everywhere, how can evil also exist in the world, in the same "space," as it were? (7.5.7) This conception of God also mocks the possibility of any relation between God and Augustine. If God is just a material being, the difference between God and man must be at least in part a material one; they must be "separated by some interval of nothingness," Skerrett writes, "so they cannot leave material traces on each other."¹ Yet if this is the case, not only is it difficult to know why God would want to have anything to do with Augustine, it is also difficult to know how God and Augustine could get close even if they wanted to: "the doctrine of a material God made nonsense of the possibility that God could get 'inside' Augustine, to that depth of unlikeness where Augustine would discover in himself an astonishing love already loving."² Augustine and God could never get close, because material difference holds (and must hold) them apart.

The Book 7 revelation that God is not material but immaterial opens up for Augustine new possibilities of connection with God. Skerrett describes Augustine's relief: "His new belief in an immaterial God suspended the template of difference/separation, and Augustine felt that suspension, momentarily, at least, as superabundance and joy."³ One upshot of Augustine's acknowledgement of God's immateriality is that it allows him to hope for some form of intimacy with God. He makes an inward ascent to a dazzling vision of God. There he sees light,

¹ Skerrett, "*Consuetudo Carnalis* in Augustine's *Confessions*," 500.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

he sees truth, and he sees love, though he admits he sees all this from afar, in a “realm of unlikeness” (*regio dissimilitudinis*; 7.10.16).⁴

In the midst of this dazzlingly beautiful vision of an immaterial God, Augustine confesses he is pulled back down to earth by his own weight, the weight of what he terms his *consuetudo carnalis*, his carnal habit (7.17.23). God’s beauty draws him, but he is struck back. So what does Augustine confess here? That even a vision of God is no match for his sex drive? That he needs to bulk up his willpower, so he will not be so drawn by the bodies of mere mortals? Skerrett suspects that to end explanation there is to oversimplify—and to miss the greater offering of Augustine’s insight. This abrupt return to earth was precipitated not just by physical compulsiveness, Skerrett suggests, but by something more: by a memory of intimacy, “the memory of an intimate belonging that seemed to drag most heavily when he aspired to embrace an immaterial God.”⁵ That memory was a reminder of his erotic desire and of his “belonging through his own incompleteness to the incompleteness of others.”⁶ It was, Skerrett says, “the paradox of identity/difference recollected incarnate as desire.”⁷ Sexual intimacy was not, for Augustine, just a disastrous nothingness, but also a real good—broken and impartial though it was—and a reminder of what it means to be a soul in time and flesh.

Sexual intimacy was a context wherein Augustine knew closeness, and that closeness had a weight that a mind-meld with an immaterial being just could not match. Augustine’s embrace of an immaterial God generated what Skerrett calls a “counterweight awareness” of his own incarnation. The content of that awareness is the reminder that he is not some isolated free chooser but a being who can be overtaken by desire, by memory, by grief. When God appears to Augustine as a thing to be grasped by the intellect, Augustine is called back by the reminder of those other beings to whom he belonged—in body, in desire, in responsibility. He—like all human beings—is a being who is beholden, with living flesh that can’t simply be reduced into free

⁴ Quotations from Augustine’s *Confessions* come from Maria Boulding’s 1997 translation. One exception is noted below.

⁵ Skerrett, “*Consuetudo Carnalis* in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 497.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

will or into bare intellect. Sexual intimacy was a context in which he was poignantly aware of the extent to which he was not his own. In Book 7, Skerret explains, Augustine finds he simply does not have the freedom to choose to give himself to an immaterial God if that offering means losing his awareness of belonging to difference, being ventured upon others, knowing exposure and expectation with others.⁸

In the moment when Augustine is desperate to know God, he is reminded of another knowledge: that knowledge to which the first man gestures when he exclaims the woman is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. That reminder serves to destabilize the vision because it is a reminder of the partiality of the knowledge gained. It may be tempting to try to get in touch with God and maintain a relationship as two immaterial beings, removed from time and bodies, locked in an eternal airless hook-up. If we succumb to that temptation, believing that mind-meld with God is the highest form of intimacy we might seek, Augustine's story could read as a cautionary tale about the way the body blocks intelligibility. If sex distracts us from God, the moral might seem to be that our chief obstacle to loving God and sharing in his life is our old deluder body, a persistent drag on our transcendent aspirations. Yet Book 7, if Skerrett is correct, is not an indictment of human embodiment and temporal entanglements (including sexual partnerships).

Skerrett finds in Augustine's words an acknowledgment that sin may be more expressive of our longing for God than we are inclined to admit. She puzzles with Augustine over the apparently motiveless impulse to cling to the difference from God we suspect sin offers. If we are beings created by God, made to love and serve him, what moves us to want less than what we want most?⁹ Why turn towards nothing when fullness of Being is before your very eyes? On Skerrett's telling, what looks like a turn toward nothingness—an apparent flight from God—may be a path forward to the true home of the father. What Skerrett hears in Augustine's confession of his abrupt loss of vision is Augustine's confession of a desire to get close to God, but in a way that misses the full meaning of what that would truly be. Skerrett's Augustine tells us not merely that the embrace did not hold—but arguably that it should not.

⁸ Skerrett, "*Consuetudo Carnalis* in Augustine's *Confessions*," 505.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 498.

In his article “Body Double: Saint Augustine and the Sexualized Will,” James Wetzel offers the complementary suggestion that a key metaphor for Book 7 is that of a womb.¹⁰ When Augustine turns inward, he finds himself in a place of unlikeness. There, Wetzel writes, “he is unlike God, who is presumptively spirit, and unlike the created order, which is presumptively material.”¹¹ In that place of unlikeness, Augustine hears God’s voice from on high: “I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: you will be changed into me” (7.10.16). Wetzel proposes two ways to read this image: “The kind of feeding that changes the feeder into the source of food is either a form of starvation, where the body is forced to feed upon itself, or it is a gestation, a feeding from within the womb.”¹² He opts for the image of a soul’s gestation: as Augustine tries to define his difference from his heavenly father and take responsibility for that difference (in his unaccountable will to sin, to turn toward nothingness),¹³ he is given a vision of himself as still in gestation, “awaiting a life-defining deliverance from [his] source.”¹⁴ If Augustine is indeed gestating in God, then he really does have his origin in God—a truth that the fact of his sin had caused him to doubt. The vision serves to release Augustine from a burden of responsibility (for differentiation, through his sin) he had shouldered. The logic of the metaphor tells us that the embrace bespeaks immaturity. God tells Augustine he is still gestating in God—and needs to be born, to acknowledge the fact of his incarnation as a son of the living God. The intimacy of gestating mother and unborn child is not meant to hold—not in the same form; a parting comes, and that parting means not just loss, but differentiation, articulation, and maturation. No child grows up inside the womb.

Skerrett doesn’t extend her analysis beyond Book 7, but Wetzel does, in his book *Augustine: A Guide for the Perplexed*. His reading of Book

¹⁰ Wetzel, “Body Double,” 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹² Wetzel, “Body Double,” 74

¹³ John Freccero finds in this passage the notion that sin, for Augustine, is a principle of individuation. If one thinks the self is distinctive because of sin, it is hard to imagine how an individual could ever get close to God. See Freccero, “Autobiography and Narrative,” 16–29.

¹⁴ Wetzel, “Body Double,” 74.

8 maintains an attention to the familial and natal context of Augustine's struggle. In Book 8, he suggests, Augustine is given not the willpower of Christ—a power that might give him perfect mastery over an unruly body—but memories of those in his life who have figured for him the love his Heavenly Father has unceasingly poured out upon him. His memory of that love—a tether that has held him despite his prodigal wandering—is what finally brings his heart home.

Wetzel notes two instances in Book 8 where the reminder of some intimacy releases Augustine into deeper love of God. In the first instance, Augustine recalls his unnamed partner under the figure of what he calls Lady Contenance, who, though chaste, is the fruitful mother of many.¹⁵ At their parting, Augustine's partner had vowed never to know another man, while Augustine not only made plans for a marriage, but took up with a stopgap mistress until the marriage could take place (6.15.25). Contenance begins to seem like something Augustine can live with when he no longer thinks of it as a bare power of self-mastery, but as a form of connection with the woman he loved—arguably as a way of being close to her, when other possibilities of intimacy had been foreclosed.

The other familial memory Wetzel finds in Book 8 comes when Augustine hears a voice "*Tolle, lege,*" from over the garden wall. Wetzel suggests Augustine's first thought when he hears the words is surely the example of Antony. Augustine had just heard the story of how Antony had picked up a book of scripture and applied the verse he found there directly to his own life. But the voice from over the garden wall was that of a child, and Wetzel hints too that the voice may also have served as a reminder to Augustine of his life with his son, perhaps calling to mind his own fatherly love as well as prompting him to remember Christ's own need for parenting.¹⁶

These two scenes in Books 7 and 8 thematize for us two ways of conceiving intimacy. In the first case, intimacy is construed as a kind of mind-meld, shared by two immaterial beings—or by two beings for whom incarnation seems to be more incidental than not. That kind of intimacy shows itself to be unstable, though not for the reasons one might suspect. Augustine is reminded that transcendence is not

¹⁵ Wetzel, *Augustine: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 101–102

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103–104.

unrelated to the fact of his being “ventured” upon another, “suspended between exposure and expectation.”¹⁷ That is to say: Augustine is reminded intimacy cannot be divorced from vulnerability. In the second case, intimacy takes the form not of a shared mind, but of a shared life (specifically a familial bond). Wetzel writes: “Augustine’s conversion is not from lust to self-restraint. It is from murky self-preoccupation to the precise tension of a life consciously lived with others.”¹⁸ In that life, the truest loves of creatures draw Augustine into deeper love and into deeper forms of intimacy with both creatures and Creator.

ONE SOUL UNITY

Here is the short version of Augustine’s discussion of his friend in Book 4: Augustine and his friend are close. An unexpected illness takes the young man from his life, and Augustine grieves bitterly. After that loss, Augustine tells us, everything he sees is hateful and speaks of death. None of his usual sources of pleasure—bed and couch, fresh air, feasting, study—can give him repose. It is not hard to sympathize with Augustine’s pain over his loss and his desperation in seeking relief. Yet Augustine does not want his reader to cut him too much slack. What many might call a normal, temporary reaction to the shock of the sudden death of a dear friend, Augustine calls madness and misery (4.7.12).

So what exactly is Augustine trying to confess? Let’s look at the details Augustine gives us. The friend in question is not named. While they had been schoolyard chums, it is only upon Augustine’s return to his hometown of Thagaste at the age of 21, as a young man, that the two of them become close. And close they are. This person was not just an acquaintance or someone Augustine respected from afar; the young man was “exceedingly dear” to him—someone he loved (4.4.7). Augustine tells us he felt as though his friend’s soul and his had been “but one soul in two bodies” (4.6.11). They shared similar views: “Similarity of outlook lent warmth to our friendship” (4.4.7). This intertwining of life, experience and views accounts in part for the depth of Augustine’s grief.

They are close. But Augustine is not confessing that he and his friend are “too close,” as though God is an easily slighted deity who does

¹⁷ Skerrett, “*Consuetudo Carnalis* in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 505.

¹⁸ Wetzel, *Augustine: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 104.

not want his subjects to get chummy with anyone besides the Almighty Himself. We might think Augustine means to confess he was “too attached” to a human being; he is so busy mooning over his friend that he neglects his prayer life and fails to give proper attention to God. There is one line in particular that can tempt us toward that interpretation: “I was miserable, and miserable too is everyone whose mind is chained by friendship with mortal things, and is torn apart by their loss, and then becomes aware of the misery that it was in even before it lost them” (4.6.11). We might suppose Augustine’s complaint is against the apparent foolishness of ever getting mixed up with mortal beings at all: They will only die—and before they die, they are death-bound. It’s better not to give your heart away to human beings, earthen vessels as they are. We would be less likely to wind up shattered if we just did not care quite so much. Instead, we ought to look for consolation in an immortal God who can supply all your needs. Augustine does try to offer himself a version of that consolation, but it simply does not work.

When Augustine tries to tell his grief-shredded self to trust in God, his disobedient soul refuses, judging the man who was so dear and had been lost to be “more real and more lovable than the fantasy” in which Augustine bid his soul to trust—that fantasy being the disinterested, immaterial God of the Manichaean religion (7.4.9). The structure here is interestingly similar to that of Book 7: Augustine tries to do what he imagines to be the “right thing” and find some comfort or connection in the conception of God on offer, but is delivered from his mistake by the memory of an attachment he just cannot shake—by the memory of a human being with whom his connection went deeper than that which could apparently be offered by an immaterial God. That God—at this point, remember, Augustine’s God is that of the Manichees—appears to tell Augustine that the “real goods” have survived: there is nothing to grieve. But in the face of that God’s apparent indifference to the loss, Augustine may worry there will be no one left to remember; he may worry he is the only one to carry the memory forward. In the immediate aftermath of grief, Augustine may well fear the beauty of the friend apparently escapes God’s notice. This kind of God weds beauty to fragility—but then tells Augustine what he took for beauty was not beauty at all.

Though Augustine may have felt closer to his friend than to God, later reflection reveals to him he was less close to his friend than he

thought. Looking back, Augustine thinks he had failed to be a true friend at all. At least part of that failure comes from the way Augustine was tempted to confuse the intimacy of friendship with identity. Recall Augustine's comment that he felt as though he and his friend were one soul in two bodies (a sentiment taken from the ancient world). Because of this, the friend's death left Augustine feeling only half alive, as though half of himself had died. And Augustine feels as though he himself, a beleaguered half soul, is really all of his friend that continues to survive. He writes: "perhaps I was so afraid of death because I did not want the whole of him to die, whom I had loved so dearly" (4.6.11). These words might be read not only as an expression of warm feeling and devotion, but also as a confession of a failure properly to track the difference between self and other. Augustine and his friend have the unity that comes from shared ideas, shared desires, and shared experiences. The soul is the form of the body, and if there is some kind of soul that can exist in two bodies, it looks like those two bodies threaten to collapse into identity. For how could an interval of difference be distinguished?

Augustine himself later said that his "one soul" comment was frivolous,¹⁹ and yet it captures something of the relationship at that time. This is clear from another Book 4 passage—a conversation that turns out to be the friends' last. It was not until Augustine returned to Thagaste to teach that his friendship with the friend blossomed, and what Augustine called friendship was also a sort of teacher-student relationship. Both Augustine and his friend had been raised in Christian households, though not yet baptized, following the custom of delaying baptism until after the boys had had a chance to sow their wild oats. Augustine, having been swept up into the company of Manichees during his time in Carthage, was besotted with their teaching, and part of the way the friendship between the two grew and flourished was by Augustine's drawing his friend away from the true faith and toward the "superstitious and baneful fables" of the Manichees so deplored by Monica (4.4.7). Returning home full of tales from the big city, Augustine drew his friend's intellect astray, and thus the "similarity of outlook" Augustine says they shared is, in truth, a similarity in error.

¹⁹ See *Retractationes*, 2.6.2.

After about a year of their renewed contact with each other, Augustine's friend takes sick with a fever and lies in bed for some time feverish and unconscious. Since he appears to be at death's door, the decision is made to baptize him without his knowledge. Augustine at the time thinks the whole thing is of no consequence: "I was unconcerned. For I was confident his soul was more likely to retain what it had received from me—not what had been done to his body while he was unconscious" (4.4.8, translation mine). Augustine thinks his friend's soul is well under his grasp, and he presumes that soul will be more ruled by what Augustine has offered than by some ritual performed on an unconscious (*nescientis*, unknowing) body. Throughout this whole time of illness, Augustine does not leave his friend's side. When the friend rallies and awakes to consciousness, Augustine tries to make light of the whole thing. He is shocked when his friend refuses to join in the fun. With *repentina libertate* ("sudden independence" or "unexpectedly bold speech"), the friend tells Augustine he had better stop saying such things, if he wishes to remain his friend. Augustine cannot believe it. Chalking up the disagreement to the stress of illness, Augustine decides to wait to continue the conversation. He reports his confidence that his influence will win out: "once he was in normal health again I would be able to do what I liked with him" (4.4.8). But this was not to be. His friend is taken away from this mortal life for his good and for Augustine's good. Augustine writes: "But he was snatched away from my mad designs, to be kept safe with you for my consolation" (4.4.8.). The fever flares up again, the friend dies, and Augustine, having given up on his faithful vigil to give his friend some space, was not there. The few days' interval of separation widens into a yawning gap that threatens to be permanent.

Here we see vividly Augustine's confession of the temptation to confuse intimacy (closeness) with sameness. Augustine thrills to the successful communication he has seemed to enjoy with this friend. Augustine's teachings make his friend, at least in part, into an image of himself. But when his friend refuses to join in the anti-Christian jesting, he threatens to slip through Augustine's fingers. And so Augustine leaves, his only hope being that in time he might be able to regain his grip. The point is not that the 21-year-old Augustine was a narcissistic cad who could not stand to hear opinions different from his own—or at least not that only. But the 43-year-old Augustine who looked back saw

in his youthful reaction a refusal to seek the good of the other. When Augustine's friend began to turn toward the good, Augustine abandoned him, until such time as he might return to Augustine's side, not just in body, but in mind and heart. The older Augustine saw a failure of true charity there, but I suspect even the younger one saw something of the failure. Part of the loudness or theatricality of Augustine's grief may have stemmed from a secret worry about whether he had loved as well as he ought.²⁰

This passage also shows us the strong gnostic attitude the young Augustine evinces. It comes in the form of an obliviousness to the meaning of the created order and the mortal bodies he and his friend inhabit. Consider Augustine's reaction to the baptism. He believes that what is done to the body won't count. The real stuff of the human being is the mind and conscious awareness. Augustine's obliviousness to the meaning of the created order also shows itself in his post-loss sense that whatever he encounters in the world is offensive and hateful. Creation has for Augustine, in a way, become one giant disappointment. It is tempting to suppose that the value of creation lies in its ability to facilitate that connection of two beings whose bodies seem incidental at best. But it didn't work this time: creation seems to Augustine to have failed by showing itself not to be trustworthy as a way of securing the connection between him and those he loves.

Augustine's youthful gnostic commitments show themselves too in the way that Augustine looks for an intimacy, a friendship, that trades on forgetfulness about death. In the friendship between Augustine and his friend, death was not unexpected just because the friend died young. Death would have always been unexpected, whenever it came; the relation was set up such that it did not countenance death. Augustine confesses he had poured out his soul "into the sand by loving a man doomed to death as though he were never to die" (4.8.13).²¹ As a Manichee, Augustine had been taught that the best things in life—the really perfect things—are untouched by corruption, death and decay.

²⁰ See Wetzel, "Trappings of Woe: Augustine's Confession of Grief," 58–80.

²¹ According to Patricia Grosse, this image is a picture of Augustine's self-preoccupation and failure to love his friend well. Augustine is engaged in self-love, and he spills himself on the ground in fruitless emotional masturbation. See Grosse, "Love and the Patriarch: Augustine and (Pregnant) Women," 126.

Death can never really take what matters. But the persistence of light and truth does not seem to preserve what Augustine had with his friend—which is why the burden of keeping his friend alive (in his own person) weighs on Augustine. Light and truth do not seem to have much of a memory for dead human beings. Death appears to come as an insuperable interruption to intimacy—for it shows the connection to have been premised on a frailty that could only be tolerated by being forgotten. Thus Augustine’s solution to his grief is, to his shame, forgetfulness. He leaves town and looks for new friends. He goes to find some other people who are not dead, so he can forget about his need—for continued connection—that apparently admits of no earthly satisfaction.

Augustine and his friend’s delight in the union of their minds and soul comes at the cost of an obliviousness to life in its non-sublimity. Death is real. It tears Augustine from talking and laughing together, from teaching and learning together, from the many ways he and the mind of his friend fused inseparably, out of many becoming one (cf. 4.8.13). Sharing a soul with another mortal being may seem like the tightest of connections, but Augustine warns of lurking danger: both mortal men might wind up lost forever.

Augustine tells us, his readers, that we can be so obsessed with avoiding death, that we overlook how generously life is offered to us—a life that can sustain the intimacy we seek both with those we love and with God. Augustine warns us lest we overlook that life, puffed up as we may be on our high-flown ways and lofty talk (4.12.19). Here is the key to lasting intimacy, the moral Augustine takes from the death of his friend (which was in fact his friend’s birth into eternal life): “Blessed is he who loves you, and loves his friend in you and his enemy for your sake. He alone loses no one dear to him, to whom all are dear in the One who is never lost. And who is this but our God, the God who made heaven and earth...?” (4.9.14). But what does it mean to love your friend in God? And how exactly does that guarantee against the ultimate loss of those loved ones?

ONE LIFE UNITY

Augustine spent a lot of his life trying to escape his mother. On one occasion, he ditched her—quite literally—on the shores of Carthage, the Aeneas to her Dido, slipping away in the night to catch a ship toward

Rome and further entanglement with the Manichees (5.8.15). Monica could be a domineering presence—plotting his future career success and insisting that he send away his partner of more than a decade. She was also a faithful one—shedding tears and offering prayers for the return of her son to the fold of the true faith. Augustine admits he has no words for the intensity of her love for him: “with far more anxious solicitude did she give birth to me in the spirit than ever she had in the flesh” (5.9.16).

In Book 9, Augustine stands with her on different shores: the Roman port of Ostia, where they summon strength for a great journey that lies ahead. The journey they have in mind is a trip back to North Africa. Augustine will once again sail alone after Monica takes sick and dies there, making a great journey of her own. But before those departures, she and Augustine find themselves unexpectedly alone together at a window overlooking a garden, and they take the opportunity to speak with one another. That conversation turns out to take place within just a couple weeks of her death.

They confer together “very intimately,” and the subject of their conversation is the eternal life of the saints and what that life must be like. As they speak, they find the pleasures of the senses pale in comparison beside the joy of *That Which Is*, and they lift themselves up in longing. They finally transcend even their own minds and touch on “that land of never-failing plenty” where Life is wisdom (9.10.24). Life is wisdom, Wisdom is life. That wisdom is eternal Being; it does not come into being and then pass away. But it is not just the wisdom of an immaterial principle; the Wisdom of God is that by and through whom all things are made. It is the source of the whole created order. And it is the sort of wisdom he can approach in the presence of his mom. Which is to say: Augustine’s birth into time and a body is not what holds him back from eternal life; it is not what holds him back from knowing God’s life. Together mother and son touch God’s wisdom, wisdom that allows both for individuation and intimacy. They find a form of transcendence that turns out to be not identical with but a fulfillment of the life they have already been living.

With a leap of their hearts, son and mother touch that wisdom, the sustaining source of all that is made. Then sighing and unsatisfied, they return to the noise of articulate speech where words begin and end.

They go on to discuss their hope that such a vision can and will last, not in time, but once the tumult of the flesh has fallen silent and once we all rise again. If their vision could last, that would be life eternal. Monica's reaction to this beautiful vision is to ask herself what she is still doing on this earth. She has seen Augustine become a Catholic Christian and even give up his secular career to be devoted to God's service. She can see nothing more to hope for in this life. Not five days later, she takes to her bed with a fever, gives up her anxiety about her body's earthly resting place, and asks only that her sons remember her before the altar of the Lord in whatever place they find themselves.

When she dies, a huge sadness fills Augustine's heart. Bereft of her comfort, his soul (*anima*) is wounded—but this time, not “half dead.” Instead, he says this: “it was as though my life was rent apart, for there had been but one life (*vita*), woven out of mine and hers” (9.12.30). One life—not “one soul,” not “one disembodied mind,” but “one life” woven from the lives of those two. Augustine stands with his mother, whose life preceded his own and whose body gave him life; Monica stands with her child, whose nonexistence she lived with for years but whose arrival surely reshaped the landscapes of her heart. Those facts shape Augustine's sense of what their life together was. Furthermore, the life Monica and Augustine share is the life they (and Christ) have made; it is not something foisted by one party onto the other. The one life that they share binds them together, allowing them to survive love's embarrassments and failures; it offers hope too that death does not mean absolute loss. They aim to live their lives in the life of Christ. In *that* intimate embrace, they are neither subsumed into each other nor swallowed up in God.

Augustine suffers from his sorrow over his mother, first fighting back tears but ultimately shedding them before God so that they might become a pillow for his soul (9.12.33). After he sheds tears for the loss of his mother's presence, he sheds a few more for the sake of Monica's soul. He prays for forgiveness for her sins and recalls her need for mercy. Acknowledging her sinfulness and trusting in the merits of Christ is, for Augustine, part of acknowledging that his mother was human. Monica was human, one whom Augustine loved but whom he could not himself preserve and save. And it is perhaps the process of entrusting her to the hands of God—even as the temporary break is a great sorrow to him—through which Augustine finds hope that she will continue to remain a

presence in his life, and be held, though differently now, in the life of Christ. That shared life binds them together and holds them through their partings. Christ's intimate presence to the human heart is what undergirds and sustains Augustine's intimacy with those he loved. That presence too is what allows him to find truly meaningful those things—those created goods—which passed from his presence.

GOD'S LIFE, GOD'S WORD

Right recounting the death of his friend and its aftermath in Book 4, Augustine offers a meditation on the transience of created things—created beauties, to be specific. He makes an analogy between created beauties and syllables. The passing of syllables, he explains, is what enables speech to be meaningful, and the passing away and succession of created goods together form a whole of which the creatures are parts (4.10.15). That is, there is meaning in them, a meaning not destroyed but revealed in their temporal passing. “Were your carnal perception able to grasp the whole, were it not, for your punishment, confined to its due part of the whole, you would long for whatever exists only in the present to pass away, so that you might find greater joy in the totality” (4.11.17). To be clear: Augustine is not telling us that we should be glad our friends die because in the master plan it all works out okay; he is not making God out to be a deranged collectivist leader, ready to sacrifice the individuals for the sake of the whole. In fact, Augustine does not tell us exactly why and how it will make sense to us—indeed, be meaningful to us—that we have known temporal parting from those we love. But he does offer consolation, of the kind that he thinks human beings are pretty clearly prone to forget. He did. The passing, he says, need not make the life any less meaningful.

Augustine did not want to hear the answer to the question that lurked, unasked, in his heart as he grieved his friend: “What kind of a God are you?” The only comfort the God of the Manichees could offer was the promise that the “real goods”—ineffable truth and light—remain. The Manichaen God could only tell Augustine to let his intellect pare down his sense of what is really of value—and to learn to pay no attention to his aching heart. But in his confessional reflection, looking back and acknowledging with us that we human beings are already entangled—close all the time, inescapably close, our hearts held in the care of so many others—Augustine forces us to confront the question he

cannot fully face back then: what kind of God weaves beauty and frailty together so closely? The God of the Manichees appears to be one who does not so much mind if those beauties—dear to us though they are—break.

Augustine offers this response to the brokenhearted: Christ is intimately present to the human heart: “Let us love him, for he made these things and he is not far off, for he did not make them and then go away: they are from him but also in him” (4.12.18). The created things, the creatures, these fragile beauties, are expressions of who he is. And he has not forgotten them, he is close to them, sustaining them and willing that not one will be lost. What is more, the temporal passing of created beauties reflects the very life of Christ himself. He ran through this life, shouting by his “words, his deeds, his death and his life, his descent to hell and his ascension to heaven, shouting his demand that we return to him” (4.12.19) He withdrew from our sight in the hope that we would return to our own hearts and find him there. When we seek for that beloved who appears lost, gone from our sight, we should look toward our hearts—and let our affection for those goods remind us of Christ’s love for them as well. We forget—we doubt—the fact of our intimacy—and our friends’ intimacy—to Christ. He offers us his life, but we fear he has overlooked the fact of death, a fact we let drag us down, hoping that our loyalty to that painful reality will make up for God’s apparent forgetfulness. But he has not forgotten, and so Augustine exhorts us: “Life has come down to you, and are you reluctant to ascend and live?” (4.12.19)

Augustine calls his friends to remember what they are: humans, nothing more and nothing less. He exhorts us, his friends, not to let the fact that we have treasures in earthen vessels lead us to think that God means to discipline us to accept a more sublime life, one more fixated on eternal principles and less liable to be “dragged down” by memories of created goods. But he also calls us to remember that those goods are not ours alone. We may cling to them, to try to make them and save them—as though we are the only ones with any stake in the matter. But Christ is intimate to our hearts; he knows our love for them—he shares it, in an even more profound form. So while we look for discipline in the form of stasis—keeping all beauties present, now, perhaps by trying to limit our attachments to only those beauties we think really can stand the test of time—Augustine tells us Christ wants for us to see meaning comes not in

what is fixed and rigorous, but in movement. A word passes, but is not lost. A life passes in time, but is not thereby lost. The unfolding of the meaning of a life is organic—and the time-bound, mortal character is as much a part of that meaning as anything else.

To conclude, I turn to one last memorial Augustine wrote in honor of one he loved: his beloved son, Adeodatus. The dialogue, *De magistro* (*The Teacher*), takes place early in Augustine's life, a couple years after their baptisms together in Milan. It was written down around the time of the untimely death of Adeodatus a year or so later. In the *Confessions*, Augustine calls his son's talents "prodigious" and tells us that everything recorded in the dialogue really came from the mouth of Adeodatus, though he was only about 16 years old at the time of the conversation. The father was in awe at the brilliance of his son. In any case, Augustine's mention of the piece in the *Confessions* makes clear it is a true portrait and a loving remembrance.

Augustine begins the dialogue with a simple question to his son: "What do you think we are trying to accomplish when we speak with one another?"²² (1.1) The dialogue is ostensibly about signs and signification. But if, as Wittgenstein tells us, to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life,²³ it is also a meditation on ways we conceive of life with others. It is arguably a reflection on the way Augustine lived with others—most especially the way he had lived with his son. It raises again the question: what kind of connection do we aspire to enjoy with those we love?

In the dialogue, Augustine and his son discuss two broad forms of speaking. The first form is what he terms speaking to inform. This is the form with which Augustine thinks we are most familiar. Or at least informing is the motivation for speaking that springs most readily to mind. By informing Augustine means something rather specific: moving another mind to contemplate whatever it is the speaker has in mind. Immutable objects best admit of this kind of shared contemplation; they are least likely to get lost in transmission. But we try to cement the connection between a sign and what it signifies for all kinds of other

²² *De magistro*. 1.1 (CCSL 29: 157): "Quid tibi uidemur efficere uelle, cum loquimur?" All translations from *De magistro* are my own.

²³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §36.

objects as well, imagining that the less flexibility we accord our words the greater communicative power we will wield. It is a weirdly ascetic form of communication, in which the content of the communicate is pared down to essentials—among which we do not number history, affect, or (Augustine wants us especially to notice) love. We may love the person with whom we speak, but that love does not form an undercurrent to all that we do and say with one another—at least not one that *means* anything. It is another fact in the world, not relevant to communication unless made the conscious object of our communication. We may protest that this is a pretty implausible description of how we do speak. And Augustine himself agrees, as it happens. Yet nonetheless he thinks it is a way we are tempted to take as an ideal—facilitating a rigorous, stripped down apprehension of meaning.

Augustine invites his son to imagine what our lives would be like if all speaking took this form. He suggests that our obsession with perfect meaningfulness can lead us into meaninglessness. When I speak in a way that assumes a lack of intimacy, I further reinforce my alienation, from interlocutors both divine and mortal. If talking aims only at informing, I cannot talk to God. Since God need not be informed of anything (there's nothing God does not already know), prayer becomes more or less a process of assembling reminders to myself and to others. And if talking aims only at informing, I will have a hard time speaking with others too. My obsession with precision can lead me to overlook just how much I was meaning already, apart from securing that precision, apart from securing the meanings of my words. I try to guarantee intimacy—or at least a bare form of connection—but I find it slips through my grasp.

This attempt is not unmotivated, and Augustine perhaps means to help us see where it comes from. It's defensive—and understandably so. We hope through this form of speaking to build a connection that is secure, free from the possibilities of misapprehension but also free from the possibility of loss. If words can put two minds in contact, such a connection cannot be sundered—not by life, nor by death, nor by any other created thing. If we could “successfully” use our words to inform other minds, we would thereby speak in ways that are “more than human,” making connections that pay no mind to death or the movements of the heart. It is tempting to wish for stable words—words that won't wriggle out of our grasp—and which can give stable form to

the flux of time and bodies. It is tempting to wish those we love would never pass.

Now bring to this scaled down motive for speaking the grief of a father's heart. Imagine trying to tell yourself, as you grieve the untimely death of your child: "My only hope is that my child and I were able to speak clearly with one another. Or: my consolation is that our conversations were unambiguous. My heart is at ease knowing we contemplated the eternal verities together. And now I will console myself by praying to a God who won't listen because there is nothing I can say in the face of his omniscience anyway."

Augustine does not mean to persuade us that we talk only to inform one another. Instead, he is once again confessing a temptation—his, and, he suspects, ours too. It is tempting to wish we could hold our words in our grasp. It is tempting to seek to stabilize our words to rule out heartbreak. The heart breaks anyway. And the brokenhearted find cold comfort in the skeletal form of intimacy that would strip flesh from spirit so that it can call what's left "clean."

What's the alternative picture? The second form of speaking Augustine describes comes out in a strange moment well into the conversation. Father and son have been tracing manifold ways words signify things or fail to signify clearly—in short, the way we succeed and fail at our apparent aim of using words to inform the minds of those around us. Augustine has been leading his son, step by step, from consideration of one kind of sign to another. Then he pauses and admits it may be hard to know what the point of it all is (8.21). So many words have passed between them. He tells his son he hopes he won't think they are just playing games, skirting serious matters in favor of schoolboy quibbles. Or if the discussion is laboring at bringing forth some child into the light—what kind of child is it? Augustine assures his son he does not lead him into consideration of trivial or indifferent things. Instead, he says he is leading them through warm-ups, trying to prepare them to bear the light and heat of the blessed life and to love that life truly. His imagery here evokes a newborn's squinting gaze. The labor may be disorienting and seem pretty pointless, yet the deliverance is, for one with eyes to see it, a realization of the promise for which one was made. Let me put the point bluntly: it is likely that at the time of writing, Augustine's son had been birthed into eternal life. Augustine expresses

his confidence here that their conversations helped prepare him for that life—specifically, helped his son grow in love of that life. But how?

Their conversation concludes with a reflection on the greatest teacher of all: Christ, the inner teacher. Is he greatest because he is least ambiguous, least broken and frail, most stable, most obviously secure in his beauty and power? That doesn't appear to be the moral on offer. Adeodatus summarizes the conversation like this: "I have learned that He alone teaches whether true things are said. He, who lives inwardly, reminded me as outwardly one spoke. With His help, I will love him more ardently the more I progress in learning." (14.46). Christ is the inner teacher. Yet as Jim Wetzel has observed, we can also rightly say the life shared between parent and child is their teacher. He writes: "Augustine and Adeodatus conclude that they do share an inner life together, one that neither of them possesses separately. They call this life their teacher. This is the life that both begins and ends their life's argument, allowing them learning through the hesitations, sometimes terrible, of sin."²⁴ That teacher is "inner" because it is intimate, a network of trust, history, and expectation that bears the meanings they have it at heart to share. Their life *is* the life of Christ, sacrificed and offered up. They are hidden in Christ, bound together as no more nor less than human beings, their filial and paternal loves united with God's own. This is why when Augustine suffers what must surely have been his most grievous loss—the death of his only son—he can remember him without anxiety. He writes: "I fear nothing whatever for that man" (9.6.14).

Augustine confesses he contributed nothing except fault to the making of the boy. Presumably he is thinking of his sin with the boy's mother. When we lose those we love, we may be tormented by the anxiety about whether we loved well enough. That is, of course, part of Augustine's lament over his friend. He loved him, but not as well as he ought, and so the loss is doubled. Augustine pushes the situation to the extreme: imagine something that has its source in your corruption. Imagine something which begins in the nothing of sin—but which you love with your whole heart. Even that, God, creator of all things, can bring to life. Even though we may remember the failures that cast shadows around our attempts at loving, God's gratuitous love gives

²⁴ Wetzel, *Augustine: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 111.

form to—reforms—our deformities. Augustine’s son was instructed in God’s truth and baptized in Christ’s church. That, of course, shores up the other source of anxiety: worry over God’s seeming indifference. Augustine is reminded that God loves Adeodatus beyond even Augustine’s capacity for love; they share that object of affection. And so he, Adeodatus, is not lost: neither lost because of Augustine’s failure to love purely nor lost by God’s supposed indifference.

Augustine is keenly aware that already our hearts are not our own. Sometimes we worry they might shatter, or we suppose God wants children less liable to notice the sheen of created beauties, and so we try to seal up our hearts and make them safe. But our memory pushes back—or rather, dilates our hearts into an awareness of how overfull they are and must be. The God who weds beauty to fragility is Christ, the one who tells us he is intimately present to the human heart, there with us in our purest and truest affections and ready to hold those we love when we do not or cannot. Augustine tells us “The good which you love derives from him” (4.12.18). Christ made all this and is even closer to it than we can imagine. His heart holds all our more fragile offerings of charity. And so Augustine’s confessions are not self-flagellation nor self-indulgence. They are confessions of praise for where he tracked God’s loves and where he did not, and confessions of hope that he and all those he loves—which is to say, the whole of God’s church and every beauty of God’s good creation—will seek and finally know the communion of the Word made flesh.

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