

# JAMES K. A. SMITH

SEX

ENLIGHTENMENT

○ JUSTICE

## AMBITION

# FREEDOM

# MOTHERS

FATHERS



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# INTRODUCTION

This is not a biography. This is not a book about Augustine. In a way, it's a book Augustine has written about you. It's a journey with Augustine as a journey into oneself. It's a travelogue of the heart. It's a road trip with a prodigal who's already been where you think you need to go.

But it's also the testimony of someone who has spent time on the road with Augustine. In Jack Kerouac's iconic novel *On the Road*, the narrator Sal Paradise plays chronicler to the antics of the star of the story, Dean Moriarty, who is really the exemplar, the hero, the model. So just call me Sal. I've been on a ride with Augustine. Here's what I've seen; here's what he's shown me (about myself); here's why you might consider coming along.

This is an invitation to journey with an ancient African who will surprise you by the extent to which he knows you. It's not because he's some guru, some Freudian analyst who haughtily sees through you. He only knows you because he's been there, because he has a sense of the solidarity of the human race in our foibles and frustrations and failed pursuits. If he jackhammers his way into the secret corners of our hearts, unearthing our hungers and fears, it's only because it's familiar territory: he's seen it all in his own soul. Augustine isn't a judge; he's more like an AA sponsor. "Nothing you could tell me would surprise me," he would



say. “Let me tell you my story.” One could say of Augustine what Leslie Jamison notes about Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*: He’s “no saint. That’s why he made salvation seem possible.”<sup>1</sup>

But the reason to consider Augustine as a guide for the journey is not just because he’s an incisive psychologist familiar with the antics of the mind in exile, or because he’s mapped the joyrides of “liberated” selves. What makes Augustine a guide worth considering is that, unlike Sal’s Dean, he knows where home is, where rest can be found, what peace feels like, even if it is sometimes ephemeral and elusive along the way.

I won’t pretend there isn’t something scandalous about his advice. Augustine will unapologetically suggest that you were made for God—that home is found beyond yourself, that Jesus is the way, that the cross is a raft in the storm-tossed sea we call “the world.” But what I hope you’ll hear in this is not a solution or an answer, not merely a dogmatic claim or demand. For Augustine, this was a hard-fought epiphany that emerged after trying everything else, after a long time on the road, at the end of his rope. The Christian gospel, for Augustine, wasn’t just the answer to an intellectual question (though it was that); it was more like a shelter in a storm, a port for a wayward soul, nourishment for a prodigal who was famished, whose own heart had become, he said, “a famished land.”<sup>2</sup> It was, he would later testify, like someone had finally shown him his home country, even though he’d never been there before. It was the Father he’d spent a lifetime looking for, saying to him, “Welcome home.”

Augustine is uncanny for us: he is so ancient he is strange, and yet his experiences are so common they feel contemporary. My hope is that this uncanniness might give you a sense of what an authentic Christianity feels like from the inside. The wager here is that an ancient African might make Christianity plausible for you, mired in the anxieties and disappointments of the twenty-first century. That’s not necessarily because you’ve been looking for God, but because you’ve been trying to find yourself. When you go spelunking in the caves of your soul with Augustine, you might be surprised who you meet down there.

Augustine might make Christianity believable for you even if you've heard it all, been there, done that, and left the stupid Christian T-shirt at home. Here's a Christianity to consider before you stop believing. Augustine might make Christianity plausible *again* for those who've been burned—who suspect that the “Christianity” they've seen is just a cover for power plays and self-interest, or a tired moralism that seems angry all the time, or a version of middle-class comfort too often confused with the so-called American Dream. If the only faith you can imagine is the faith of your parents, Augustine has been down that road. What if it was precisely the strangeness of his ancient struggles that made Augustine perennial, someone with the distance from our own immersion to give us a vantage point for seeing ourselves—and the Christian faith—*anew*?



IN HER MEMOIR *Hold Still*, photographer Sally Mann quotes one of her father's diary entries: “Do you know how a boatman faces one direction, while rowing in another?”<sup>3</sup> This book you are holding is an invitation to a posture like that: to move forward by looking back, to make progress by considering ancient wisdom. To get in a boat headed for a new future, looking back to Augustine on the North African shore as a landmark to orient us.

You might be surprised how many radicals and innovators have been in that boat. Thinkers and writers and playwrights who've shaped us more than we realize have looked back to Augustine across the twentieth century. You'll be reintroduced to them on the road here: Martin Heidegger, the father of existentialism, whose cascading influence across France and beyond eventually made us all seekers of authenticity; Albert Camus, who named our experience of the absurd, spent the early part of his career wrestling with Augustine, and perhaps never stopped; Hannah Arendt, who probed the nature of love and friendship in conversation

with Augustine; Jacques Derrida, *enfant terrible* of postmodernism, who deconstructed and unsettled our confidence in eternal verities and would later return to consider the secrets his North African compatriot offered. There are ways in which the twentieth century was Augustinian, which makes him our contemporary in ways we haven't considered. What if he still speaks? What if Augustine is not only behind us but also ahead of us, waiting for us to arrive where he ended? Maybe it's time to consider his answer to the questions he gave us.



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# ORIENTATION



Wherein we find  
our bearings  
and meet our companion  
and discover he  
has been alongside us this  
whole time.



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# HEART ON THE RUN

## *How to Hit the Road*

It might be youth. It might be the reptilian impulses of a species with migration encoded in its DNA. It might be your inferiority complex or the boredom of small-town claustrophobia or the exhibitionist streak you've never told anyone about. It might be the hungers of ancestors whose aspirations have sunk into your bones, pushing you to go. It might be loneliness. It might be your inexplicable attraction to "bad boys" or the still unknown thrill of transgression and the hope of *feeling* something. It might be the self-loathing that has always been so weirdly bound up with a spiritual yearning. It might be the search for a mother, or a father, or yourself. It might be greed or curiosity. It might be liberation or escape. It might be a million other reasons, but we all leave.

It's like all we ever do is leave. "Honey, all I know to do is go," the Indigo Girls confess in "Leaving." You can leave without a bus ticket, of course. You can depart in your heart and take an existential journey to anywhere but the "here" that's stifling you. You can be sleeping in the same bed and be a million miles away from your partner. You can still be living in your childhood bedroom and have departed for a distant country. You can play the role of the "good son" with a heart that roams in a twilight beyond good and evil. You can even show up to church every week with a voracious appetite for idols. Not all prodigals need a passport.



We leave because we're looking. For something. For someone. We leave because we long for something else, something more. We leave to look for some piece of us that's missing. Or we hit the road to leave ourselves behind and refashion who we are. We hit the road in the hope of finding what we're looking for—or at least sufficiently distracting ourselves from the hungers and haunting absences that propelled our departure in the first place.

And the road doesn't disappoint: it offers an unending ribbon of sights and stop-offs whose flashing billboards promise exactly what you're looking for—happiness, satisfaction, joy. Indeed, the road has a strange way of showing what looks like a destination in the distance that, when you get there, points to another destination beyond it. So just when you think friendship or wealth or a family or influence was your ultimate destination, you hang out there for a while and the place starts to dim. What once held your fascination—even, for a time, seemed like it was your reason to live—doesn't “do it” for you anymore. You won't admit it to yourself for a long while. After all, you sent out all those celebratory announcements about your new existential home. You effectively told everyone you'd arrived; you believed it yourself. But at some point you'll finally be honest with yourself about the disappointment, and eventually that disappointment becomes disdain, and you can't wait to get away. Fortunately, just as you start to look around, you see the promise of a new destination down the road.

Like the crew in Kerouac's *On the Road*, we convince ourselves that “the road is life.”<sup>1</sup> We've been shaped by a book that many of us have never read, the tale of bohemians and beatniks on a journey of self-discovery. *On the Road* chronicles their quest for experience, for authenticity. The narrator, Sal Paradise, paints a picture of the road that suggests happiness is crooking our straight paths. Like John the Baptist in negative, Sal Paradise proclaims the incessant, frantic way of his messiah, Dean Moriarty: “Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road.”<sup>2</sup> But really, who isn't?

Our road-hunger is like some leftover evolutionary habit from our ancestors. But ours is a pilgrimage without a destination—which is to say, it's not a pilgrimage at all but rather a pilgrimage deferred, not because we stay home but because we revel in the roaming, or at least try to talk ourselves into that. Our ancestors sang psalms of ascent as they marched to Zion or made the arduous hajj to Mecca or wended their way to Canterbury. We've inherited their pilgrim penchant, but it's morphed into unsettledness, a baseline antsy feeling that leaves us never feeling at home (which brings to mind the Freudian notion of the “uncanny,” the *Unheimlich*, not-at-home-ness). We're always on the move, restless, vaguely chasing something rather than oriented to a destination. We're all a bit like Mississippi Gene, whom Sal meets in *On the Road*: “He had no place he could stay in without getting tired of it and because there was nowhere to go but everywhere.”<sup>3</sup>

If the road is life, then we're not really vagabonds. To be on the way is to have arrived. Ignore “the feeling of sadness only bus stations have”;<sup>4</sup> ignore the nights of despair and move on;<sup>5</sup> don't get too hung up on your recognition that “LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities.”<sup>6</sup> And when you find yourself haunted by the sense that you've forgotten something and recognize this as the wake-up call of mortality, the vague way the fear of death settles over your wandering, be like Sal: find a friend who will take you to the club and numb the sound of that revenant.<sup>7</sup> The trick is to convince yourself that the road is life, making restlessness peace, uprootedness home, like Sal: “The car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm and the IT of our final excited joy in talking and living to the blank tranced end of all innumerable riotous angelic particulars that had been lurking in our souls all our lives.”<sup>8</sup>

Whether we can really pull this off is the question considered in *Up in the Air*, a George Clooney film based on the novel by Walter Kirn. Ryan Bingham, played by Clooney, has shed all attachments. He lives on airplanes and is “at home” in airports. His quest isn't a destination but incessant journeying: he wants to be a million miler. In fact, he has made

a career of telling people to shed everything that would hold them down. As a motivational speaker with a gimmicky prop—a backpack filled with all the things that weigh us down, especially relationships—Bingham counsels up-in-the-air independence. But when his assistant finally challenges him with the question, “What do you want?” Bingham is silent (“You don’t even know what you want,” she spits back.) And when he achieves the sought-after million-miler status, the captain visits him, congratulates him (“We appreciate your loyalty”), and asks, “So where are you from?” Bingham’s only reply is, “I’m from here.” The hollowness rings in his own ears.

The question that haunts our journey, the question that Sal Paradise is confronted with early on, goes unanswered: “You boys going to get somewhere,” a Nebraska farmer asks, “or just going?” Looking back, Sal now sees: “We didn’t understand his question, and it was a damned good question.”<sup>9</sup> Do we tell ourselves we’re “just going” in order to guard against the disappointment of never arriving? Do we call the road “home” to avoid the pain of never being welcomed?

What if you met a saint on the road, and that saint had a map and had spent time at every stop-off that lured but then disappointed you? What if he’d already met the “you” you somehow want to be? What if he could introduce you to the person you’ve been looking for and lead you to a house with many rooms, where a Friend would open the door and say, “Welcome home. You can rest here”?



A YOUNG MAN meanders through the bustle of the port at dusk, his last night in Africa. His father is dead. He has eluded his cloying mother with a lie that pains him, but it is a necessary evil if he’s ever going to escape her and her provincial faith. The waves of the Mediterranean lap on the coast of Carthage with hints of hope, as if carrying the transformation



he's expecting in Rome. The Eternal City is now invested with the glow of his success, like Gatsby's green light blinking as a beacon of a future, hoped-for arrival. In Rome he'll finally find what he's been looking for. In Rome he'll become the man he's destined to be, the person he *deserves* to be. Augustine will have arrived.

Granted, yes, he once expected to find all this in Carthage, as close as one could get to Rome in Africa. It's where he discovered the theater. It's where he found his professional calling and started to move in literary circles. It's where he fell in love with love. It's where he found *her*. But now Carthage feels like a backwater: unsophisticated, provincial, a town not big enough for his importance. What had been a destination has now become a way station. The place he longed to reach is now just a launching pad to the new destination that promises happiness.

Just before dark, the sails begin to ripple. A fortuitous wind has arrived. Time to go. "The wind blew and filled our sails and the shore was lost to our sight."<sup>10</sup>

But when he gets to Rome, that beacon is still blinking. Now it's coming from Milan, seat of the emperor. The next rung on the ladder is a post as an imperial rhetor; the networks the young man has cultivated are paying off. When the job offer arrives, it comes with a promise that he will be transported via the imperial courier (*cursus publicus*). Funny how dingy Rome suddenly looks when the emperor sends Air Force One to whisk you away to his palace.

Milan for Augustine is our Manhattan or London or, well, Milan—a metropolis made of money and power. What John Foot says of contemporary Milan is true of the ancient city (and all other sites of earthly ambition): "Milan is a city obsessed by one thing, or rather by two—work and money."<sup>11</sup> It's the place where you either "make it" or slink home in defeat. The hopes of such urban pilgrimages are perennial: to realize the "you" that's been buried in the provincial version of yourself until now. These cities are like sculptors in a sense, unearthing the "you" that was always just beneath the surface. So you go to climb, achieve, win, conquer; you

go to realize your potential and demonstrate your worth; you go to enjoy the good life and inhale the energy of influence, the freedom that comes with privilege; you go to remake yourself, but in so doing you expect to find the “you” you always knew you could be. It’s why you “find yourself” someplace else. The road is the road to that “you.”

Which is why this young man is so rattled when Milan disappoints him. Milan was supposed to be the end of the road, the destination he had envisioned as synonymous with happiness. Working in the precincts of the imperial palace, unleashing his creative energy and expertise, mingling with the great and the good, he would be seen for who he was: Augustine, the precocious provincial, the African from the edge of the empire who’d made it to the center. The happy life had a zip code, and Augustine now lived there.

So why didn’t he feel at home? Why did the *Unheimlich* still haunt him? He thought he was coming to Milan to get close to the emperor; he didn’t expect to fall for a bishop.

Augustine is a saint who’s been down that road we still travel, fueled by ambition, trailing our hopes behind us. He’s familiar with all the things we carry.



IN SAN GIMIGNANO, a Tuscan hill town south of Florence—not far from the path that would have taken Augustine from Rome to Milan—is a small Augustinian church from the thirteenth century. Not to be confused with the magnificent Duomo in the center of town, the Chiostro di Sant’Agostino is a humble affair just inside the north wall. On the day we visited, our heels clapped on quiet, narrow streets. We seemed to have the place to ourselves. A bright spring sun turned the sky neon indigo, the heavenly ceiling for a memorable alfresco meal of Tuscan pici and lamb ragù at the Locanda di Sant’Agostino Osteria next door.

But we were here for the frescoes inside the church. In the apsidal chapel is a stunning series of paintings that capture Augustine on the road. Painted by Benozzo Gozzoli in the fifteenth century (1464–65), the images narrate the life of Augustine from his childhood education in Thagaste to his death in Hippo. The cycle of seventeen episodes, circling from left to right, bottom to top, is a bit like staging Shakespeare as a hip-hop drama: Gozzoli's realism transposes Augustine to Renaissance plazas adorned in fifteenth-century attire. The realism demystifies the saint. Because we can imagine him being like us, a solidarity that is at the heart of the *Confessions*, it encourages imitation. When fourth-century Carthage looks like thirteenth-century Florence, and ancient Hippo looks like medieval Milan, it might help us see why the aspirations of ancient Rome aren't so different from those of contemporary Los Angeles.

Gozzoli's rehearsal of Augustine's life is inflected with intriguing emphases. Education and teaching dominate the cycle, from Augustine's own boyhood education in Africa to his role as teacher in Rome, Milan, and Hippo. This is Augustine the humanist rediscovered in the Renaissance—the Augustine who read Plato, reformed rhetoric, and championed the liberal arts. Not surprisingly, his mother Monica appears in five of the scenes, including a heartrending scene of her being left behind.<sup>12</sup>

But utterly singular is Gozzoli's fascination with Augustine's various journeys. The frescoes might as well have been called "On the Road with Augustine." Gozzoli paints Augustine on the move. We see Monica praying he won't leave, and then immediately beside it Augustine's journey to Rome, Monica now at the left with hand upstretched in prayer over the saint at sea.

We see him landing at the port in Ostia, en route to the Rome that will disappoint him. The cycle later brings us back to Ostia to witness the death of Monica. But in Gozzoli's unique attempt to convey temporal dynamism in a single static frame, through the columns on the right we see Augustine set sail, returning to the Africa he'll never leave (see

figure 1, top). True to one of the most enduring aspects of Augustine's character, he never travels alone.

The panel that most captivated me, though, depicts Augustine's departure from Rome for Milan. Augustine has acquired relationships of note. Dignitaries attend his departure. Medieval Rome is in the distance behind him, the Tuscan hills lie before them, and over the horizon lies Milan (figure 1, bottom).<sup>13</sup> The regal transport of the imperial courier means he can travel on horse. The beasts are stately, powerful, and—curiously—looking right at us. Are you coming? their eyes seem to ask. Have you considered this road? Do you know where this leads? Does *he*?



IT IS PERHAPS ironic, and a sign of how far he'd come, that a decade after his move to Milan the middle-aged Augustine who had roamed in search of happiness found that the blinking beacon of hoped-for joy kept receding despite his pursuit. This might explain why he would come to identify happiness with *rest*.

If the young Augustine was tempted to imagine that “the road is life,” that happiness was synonymous with adventure, with going out, with departing for distant shores and escaping the strictures of home, then his midlife *Confessions* reveal a U-turn of sorts. If the aspiring Augustine was looking to Virgil as a model, imagining himself on his own odyssey of conquest in Italy, only later will Augustine see a different pattern emerge in his wanderings: the prodigal who comes home.

This might not be the prodigal you know. This is the existential prodigal, the wayward son filtered through philosophy, hearing the Gospel of Luke through Platonic ears as a cautionary parable of human existence. It is the tale of an ungrateful son who runs off with his premature inheritance, having effectively told his father, “I wish you were dead.” And this odd, surprising Father acquiesces: “Here you go,” he says. “I love you.” The



son takes his Father's property (*ousia*) and departs for a distant country, squandering it in "dissolute living" and ending up with nothing—and nothingness.

How could Augustine resist reading this as a parable of human existence itself? Being (*ousia*) is gifted to us by our Creator, but we take the gift as if there were no Giver, and we set off to "live" according to our best lights. The result? You, a good Jewish boy, wake up one morning and realize that even the pigs are eating better than you are, and you start to ask yourself some questions, like "What the hell am I doing?" And "Who am I?" And "Whose am I?" So despondent you can't even voice it, you nonetheless wonder, timidly, desperately: "Would my father ever take me back?" By some grace inexplicable, you start on your way back home. And as you're yet again rehearsing a long speech that is three parts apology and two parts legal plea for reinstatement, you're bowled over when that Father of yours comes running and gathers you up in his arms while your head is down, and your mother later tells you, "He walked to the end of the road every single day waiting for you."

This is the road trip in which Augustine finally saw himself, and it becomes the literary skeleton of the *Confessions*, a travelogue of the human heart. The reason Augustine tells *his* story is that he thinks it is simply an example of the *human* story—that we are all prodigals—and he wants us to ask ourselves a question: "What if I went home?"

For Augustine, psychology is cartography: to understand oneself is a matter of mapping our penchant to look for love in all the wrong places. The range of our exterior wandering is mirrored by the interior expanse of the soul. "A human being as such is a huge abyss," he would later muse to his God. "You know the number of hairs on his head, Master, and in you there's no subtraction from that number; but it's easier to count his hairs than his moods or the workings of his heart."<sup>14</sup> One's own heart can be foreign territory, a terra incognita, and this lack of at-home-ness with oneself generates our propensity to run. We still can't find what we're looking for because we don't know what we want. If we never seem to

arrive, growing tired of every place that promised to be the end of the road, it's because the terrain of our interior life is a wilderness of wants. When we leave home looking for happiness, we're in search of the self we never knew.

That's why, Augustine suggests, you can be prodigal without moving an inch. What we're mapping here is the geography of desire. It took running from Carthage to Rome to Milan for Augustine to realize that his exile was inward:

One does not go far away from you or return to you by walking or by any movement through space. The younger [prodigal] son in your Gospel did not look for horses or carriages or ships; he did not fly on any visible wing, nor did he travel along the way by moving his legs when he went to live in a far country and prodigally dissipated what you, his gentle father, had given him on setting out, showing yourself even gentler on his return as a bankrupt.<sup>15</sup>

When Augustine put on this prodigal lens to look at himself, he had an epiphany. This narrative frame would reframe everything and explain what had puzzled him; it would give him concepts to name what had been gnawing away at him and permission to be honest about his disappointment with what everyone else saw as “success.” What looks like attainment in Milan—success, conquest, arrival—was experienced as one more letdown. What looks like the good life is experienced as loss of nothing less than one's self. Just as the prodigal son spends down his inheritance to nothingness, so the wandering, ravenous soul consumes everything and ends up with nothing: no identity, no center, no self. The “distant country” where the prodigal ends up isn't just far off and lonely. It dissolves. It fragments. It liquefies. “I was storm-tossed, gushing out, running every which way, frothing into thin air in my filthy affairs.”<sup>16</sup> The frantic pursuit of the next place is symptomatic of his self-alienation. “I had left myself and couldn't find me,” Augustine recalls. “I turned myself into a famished land I had to live in.”<sup>17</sup>

The road, the journey, the quest not only organizes his *Confessions*; it is a dominant metaphor of Augustine's spirituality. In *Teaching Christianity*, his manual for preachers, he describes a heart on the run. Where we rest is a matter of what and how we love. Our restlessness is a reflection of what we try to "enjoy" as an end in itself—what we look to as a place to land. The heart's hunger is infinite, which is why it will ultimately be disappointed with anything merely finite. Humans are those strange creatures who can never be fully satisfied by anything created—though that never stops us from trying. The irony, Augustine points out, is that we experience frustration and disappointment when we try to make the road a home rather than realizing it's leading us home, when we try to tell ourselves "the road is life." Then we foist infinite expectations upon the finite. But the finite is given as a gift to help us get elsewhere.

This we should be making use of with a certain love and delight that is not, so to say, permanently settled in, but transitory, rather, and casual, like love and delight in a road, or in vehicles, or any other tools and gadgets you like, or if you can think of any better way of putting it, so that we love the means by which we are being carried along, on account of the goal to which we are being carried.<sup>18</sup>

There is joy in the journey precisely when we don't try to make a home out of our car, so to speak. There is love on the road when we stop loving the road. There are myriad gifts along the way when we remember it's a *way*. There is delight in the sojourn when we know where home is.

But how to get home? Is there really hope of rest? What if the road is long and we're sick and tired of rest-stop food and the cheap motels we called "success," and the pleasures of this journey have turned stale? What if we can see through the finite, and we have some inkling of another shore but despair of ever getting there? What if we've gotten just far enough to see that no place will make us happy and so have given up the quest altogether?

Augustine has been there. Later in his life, in a sermon on the African shore in Hippo, he would revisit this with his congregation. When you've

tried everything but keep finding that what you grasped as ultimate bleeds through your fingers as finite, he says,

It is as if someone could see his home country from a long way away, but is cut off from it by the sea; he sees where to go, but does not have the means to get there. In the same way all of us long to reach that secure place of ours where that which is *is*, because it alone always *is* as it is. But in between lies the sea of this world through which we are going, even though we already see where we are going (many, however, do not see where they are going).<sup>19</sup>

The brutal truth: *You* can't get there from here. Not even a map is enough. You might already have realized where you need to go, but the question is how to get there.

What if God sent a boat? What if the Creator captained a ferry from that other shore?

“So that we might also have the means to go, the one we were longing to go to came here from there. And what did he make? A wooden raft for us to cross the sea on.”<sup>20</sup> God sends a raft from home: “For no one can cross the sea of this world unless carried over it on the cross of Christ.” Get on, God invites. Hang on. I'll never let you go.

It's not just a matter of finally settling down or coming to the end of the road. We find rest because we are found; we make it home because someone comes to get us. The prodigal's story reframes everything because of how it ends: “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The wayward son is not defined by his prodigality but by the welcome of a father who never stopped looking, who is ever scanning the distance, and who runs to gather him up in an embrace. God is not tapping his foot judgmentally inside the door as you sneak in, crawling over the threshold in shame. He's the father running toward you, losing his sandals on the way, his



robes spilling off his shoulders, with a laughing smile whose joy says, “I can’t believe you came home!” This is what grace looks like.

Meditating on the incarnation, on God becoming human in Jesus, Augustine describes the God who runs to meet us: “He lost no time, but ran with shouts of words, acts, death, life, descent, ascent, all the time shouting for us to return to him.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus is the shout of God, the way God runs out to meet us. Augustine shares the story of his prodigality as an invitation to find ourselves in the end of the story. To map our roaming like that of the prodigal is not a cartography of despair or self-loathing and shame; to the contrary, it is a geography of grace that is meant to help us imagine being welcomed home.

“Oh, the twisted roads I walked!” Augustine recalls. “But look, you’re here, freeing us from our unhappy wandering, setting us firmly on your track, comforting us and saying, ‘Run the race! *I’ll* carry you! *I’ll* carry you clear to the end, and even at the end, *I’ll* carry you.’”<sup>22</sup>



WHOSE HEART ISN’T prodigal? One of the gifts Augustine offers is a spirituality for realists. Conversion is not a “solution.” Conversion is not a magical transport home, some kind of Floo powder to heaven. Conversion doesn’t pluck you off the road; it just changes how you travel.

One of the reasons I’ve found Augustine a comforting companion on the way is that he is honest about how hard the road is even once you know where home is. His pastoral realism recognizes something I hear in the music of Jason Isbell about winding roads and ditches that seem to have a magnetic pull about them. You can hear it in “Heathens,” a song he performed with his earlier band, the Drive-By Truckers:

It just gets so hard to keep between the ditches  
when the roads wind the way they do.

Or in Isbell's solo work, like "Flying over Water":

From the sky the highway's straight as it could be.  
A string pulled tight from home to Tennessee.  
And still somehow those ditches took a better part of me.

Augustine doesn't write from the sky; he writes from the road. He knows ditches, and as he'll confess in book 10 of the *Confessions*, not even a bishop can avoid them. We are still *on the way*. He comes to this realization not long after his own conversion. As he points out in one of his early dialogues, "Just as the soul is the whole life of the body, God is the happy life of the soul. While we are doing this, until we have done it completely, we are on the road."<sup>23</sup> Peter Brown, Augustine's magisterial biographer, captures this creeping realization:

For some years, he remained perched between two worlds. There was no more talk of an "ascent" in this life. "Remember . . . you have postponed your vision" [*On the Free Choice of the Will* 2.16.42]. A new image will make its appearance: that of a long highway, an *iter*. The moments of clear vision of truth that the mind gains in this life, are of infinite value; but they are now the consolations of a traveller on a long journey: "While we do this, until we achieve our aim, we are still travelling." These moments are no more than points of light "along this darkening highway" [2.16.41]. Augustine, himself, always resented travelling: he always associated it with a sense of protracted labour and of the infinite postponement of his dearest wishes; and these associations will colour the most characteristic image of the spiritual life in his middle age.<sup>24</sup>

There are two very different kinds of dissatisfaction or restlessness. One is engendered by disappointment, by not knowing where home is, by thinking you've arrived only to later become tired of the place or realize it's not home in the way you thought it was. In this case the road is the endless exhaustion of continuing to try to locate home, the frantic search for rest. That is the angst of the prodigal still in exile.

But there is another kind of restlessness that can be experienced on the road, a fatigue that stems from knowing where home is but also realizing you're not there yet—a kind of “directed” impatience.<sup>25</sup> The first is a baseline aimlessness that keeps looking for home; the second is the weariness of being en route, burdened by trials and distracted by a thousand byways and exhausted by temptations along the way that sucker you into forgetting where home is.

Augustine's spiritual realism doesn't shrink from honesty about this ongoing struggle.<sup>26</sup> You can hear this counsel in his sermon on Psalm 72, reflecting on Israel's experience after the exodus, its liberation through the sea. “Notice this point, brothers and sisters,” he admonishes. “After crossing the Red Sea the Israelites are not given their homeland immediately, nor are they allowed carefree triumph, as though all their foes had disappeared. They still have to face the loneliness of the desert, and enemies still lurk along their way.” Here is a template for the experience of a converted life: “So too after baptism Christian life must still confront temptations. In that wilderness the Israelites sighed after their promised homeland; and what else do Christians sigh for, once washed clean in baptism? Do they already reign with Christ? No; we have not reached our homeland yet, but it will not vanish; the hymns of David will not fail there.” The key is to know where we are, and whose we are, and where we're headed, and not be surprised by the burdens of the road. “Let all the faithful listen and mark this; let them realize where they are. They are in the desert, sighing for their homeland.” The Egyptians might not be pursuing us anymore, but that doesn't mean there aren't new threats on the way, “lying in ambush along our path.”<sup>27</sup> To know where you're headed is not a promise of smooth sailing.

This is why book 10 of Augustine's *Confessions* is such a gift: it is the testimony of a broken bishop in the present. You realize Augustine isn't just narrating past temptations he has escaped; he's confessing all the ways he's still tempted to camp out in alcoves of creation as if they were home. “I struggle every day,” he admits, and I love him for doing so.<sup>28</sup>

This is the authenticity we should value. As Jay-Z puts it in his memoir, *Decoded*:

This is one of the things that makes rap at its best so human. It doesn't force you to pretend to be only one thing or another, to be a saint or sinner. It recognizes that you can be true to yourself and still have unexpected dimensions and opposing ideas. Having a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other is the most common thing in the world. The real bull—— is when you act like you *don't* have contradictions inside you, that you're so dull and unimaginative that your mind never changes or wanders into strange, unexpected places.<sup>29</sup>

Any version of Christianity that isn't honest about this is not Augustinian. As French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion points out, conversion doesn't solve temptation; rather, it heightens temptation, because conversion creates resistance. In some sense, the tension of time is experienced more intensely by the soul that is on its way home. In conversion I find myself; I'm pulled together from the liquefaction of disordered loves and distractions that dissolved me. But conversion introduces a new kind of tension in my experience: "resistance of what I have become to what I used to be." Even if, by grace, I find wholeness, find *myself*, the experience of conversion—of reordering, reorienting—"renders me different from myself."<sup>30</sup> "Coming to myself" isn't an escape; instead, it makes the struggle more quotidian: every day I'm haunted. Selfhood is an ordeal not just before conversion but *because of* conversion. It is the converted, baptized, ordained Augustine who confesses, "*Onus mihi, oneri mihi sum*": "I am a burden to myself."<sup>31</sup>

The question is *how* to bear this burden. As Marion rightly comments, this "weight of the self," this burden of conversion, means "deciding between two burdens: that of the self reduced to itself, the weight of a deadweight, or that which I would love and which would lighten me."<sup>32</sup> There is a burden that actually takes the weight off, a yoke that liberates.

Augustine invites his parishioners to consider giving themselves over to one who gave himself for them, the Christ who assures them, “My yoke is kindly and my burden light” (Matt. 11:30). “Every other burden oppresses you and feels heavy, but Christ’s burden lifts you up; any other burden is a crushing weight, but Christ’s burden has wings.”<sup>33</sup> Not only can you make it home; you can fly.