

AUGUSTINE'S *THE*
CONFESSIONS: THE
POWER OF SPIRITUAL
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Nicole Howe on the Importance of First
Person Testimonies

Since the first sunrise of creation, mankind has relied on story to make sense of a chaotic world. When we experience seemingly random events happening in isolation, storytelling can serve to consolidate those bits and pieces into a single, unifying theme and restore order. Centuries ago, we had great epic poems from Homer and Virgil which strove to organize a disorderly world through the characters of Odysseus and Aeneas. Today, we still have narratives. News outlets spin current events in a particular way to fit a particular storyline. Varying religions have their own take on

the creation of the world and our purpose within it. Whether in ancient myth or a current news magazine, we are often asking ourselves the same questions: “Who are we?” and “where are we headed?”

In his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine shares the story of his own, real-life pilgrimage, and in so doing, beautifully enunciates Jesus Christ as the answer to so many of the question marks in our lives. Stories of the hero-wanderer have been told throughout the ages, calling us back to the same universal themes. However, while Odysseus’s wandering finally ends at his home in Ithaca, St. Augustine’s ends with the chains of sin breaking loose and glory given to God. By harnessing the power of personal narrative, *The Confessions* gracefully points to the ultimate reality behind both ancient and modern-day myths, revealing the real cause for our wandering as sin and Christ as the hero who brings us home.

Augustine makes many of his strongest points by drawing a comparison to another wanderer, the Prodigal Son. Through Augustine’s own prodigal journey, we see Jesus’s parable come to life, infused with new depth and meaning. After living the first part of his life immersed in total self-indulgence, this future saint finally discovers that it is “not

with our feet or by traversing great distances”¹ that we wander away from God or find our way back to Him. The prodigal son “did not hire horses or carriages . . . when he journeyed to that far country where he could squander at will the wealth [God], his gentle father, had given him at his departure.”² Augustine reveals the important truth he has discovered in his own life: the journey of wandering and overcoming is not a physical journey; it is a spiritual one. Throughout the ages, many of the stories of struggle and victory are pointing to this deeper spiritual truth: to “be estranged in a spirit of lust and lost in darkness” is “what it means to be far away from [God’s] face.”³ As Augustine connects his personal narrative to this ultimate truth, it can help us better connect with our own prodigal heart, bringing Jesus’s words to life in our souls.

In *The Confessions*, we see the power of personal narrative played out in Augustine’s own life, as he recounts occasions in which a personal story profoundly changed his point of view. When Simplicianus recounted how a successful

¹ Augustine, *Augustine: The Confessions*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997) 1.18.28.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 1.18.28.

rhetorician named Victorinus had recently been baptized, Augustine was incredibly moved. In fact, he was so inspired that he was “fired to imitate”⁴ him. It is clear that Simplicianus knew the power of a good testimony to inspire one to action, as Augustine tells us it was “to that end that . . . Simplicianus had related it.”⁵ Augustine was also moved upon hearing how Victorinus was forced to give up his career in teaching literature and rhetoric due to a new law forbidding Christians to teach. Augustine tells us that, for Victorinus, this was a happy step and not a heroic one, “since it afforded him the opportunity to be at leisure with [God].”⁶ Augustine was able to recognize the peace that had been given to Victorinus, and he saw something that he wanted. Though he was still wrestling with sexual appetites, he tells us that “a new will had begun to emerge”⁷ in him. The “will to worship disinterestedly” and “enjoy”⁸ God was growing ever stronger in Augustine’s soul. The

⁴ Ibid., 8.5.10.

⁵ Ibid., 8.5.10.

⁶ Ibid., 8.5.10.

⁷ Ibid., 8.5.10.

⁸ Ibid., 8.5.10.

story of Victorinus sparked a longing in Augustine that drew him ever nearer to the truth.

Augustine also describes an exchange he has with Ponticianus, during which a personal story profoundly impacts his imagination. Upon visiting one day, Ponticianus begins to tell Augustine and Alypius “the tale of the wonders [God] had worked within the true faith of the Catholic Church,” and they were both were “stupefied” and “spellbound.”⁹ He then goes on to tell a story of the conversion of two men. Ponticianus and three of his colleagues had been taking a walk in the gardens in the court of Trier. Two of the colleagues went in another direction and ended up in a servant’s cottage where they discovered *The Life of Antony*. Ponticianus explains that as one of them began to read it, “his admiration and enthusiasm were aroused.”¹⁰ Antony had renounced his secular career to follow God, and hearing this caused the man to “mull over the possibility of the same kind of life for himself.”¹¹ After sharing his thoughts with his friend, both of the men decided to “abandon all

⁹ Ibid., 8.14.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.15.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.15.

their possessions”¹² and follow God right then. In Ponticianus’s account, we not only see the influence of Antony’s story over these two men, but we also see how this story sparks Augustine’s imagination, as well! Both the story told by Simplicianus *and* the story told by Ponticianus produced a potent concoction of truth that became impossible for Augustine to ignore. Faced with the accounts of such faithfulness on the part of Victorinus and the two men in the garden, Augustine comes face to face with his own wandering heart.

These personal stories were powerful for Augustine, in part, because they were so relatable. Augustine could immediately identify with the men, thus they acted like a mirror for him to see the truth of his own condition. Augustine had expressed disdain for being forced to read the epic poems of Homer, because he did not have a firm grasp of the Greek language.¹³ How profound it must have been for him to encounter a story he could finally understand. Although a successful rhetorician, Victorinus willingly quit his career to serve God. Augustine was in the exact same field

¹² Ibid., 8.15.

¹³ Ibid., 1.14.23.

yet had not been able to make the same commitment. The two men in the garden were also willing to drop everything to follow God immediately. Augustine had been “putting off the moment”¹⁴ of giving himself over to a life fully committed to the “search for wisdom”¹⁵ and had chosen instead to continue his prodigal wandering down “crooked paths,”¹⁶ following Manichean doctrine for twelve years.

Augustine acknowledges to God the profound impact these tales had on him, saying, “you set me down before my face, forcing me to mark how despicable I was.”¹⁷ God used the personal narratives of these other men to show Augustine the truth about his own behavior. Though he admits he had been “aware of it all along,” he was “glossing over it and suppressing it.”¹⁸ The relating of stories so similar to Augustine’s own journey helped him see himself in a new light and brought the conviction his heart so desperately needed. It was not long after he heard these tales that

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.7.16.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.7.16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.7.16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.7.16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.7.16.

Augustine would experience his own extraordinary “garden” conversion. In his own backyard, the wandering prodigal finally came home.

Perhaps Augustine took the great risk to write *The Confessions* because he recognized the value that a spiritual autobiography could have in “firing” others to imitate him. It is no doubt that Augustine faced potential ridicule in sharing such a personal story, and this is something that clearly concerned him. He writes, “If there is anyone whom you have called, who by responding to your summons has avoided those sins which he finds me remembering and confessing in my own life as he reads this, let him not mock me; for I have been healed by the same doctor who has granted him the grace not to fall ill.”¹⁹ For those that may not relate to his struggles, it may be tempting to belittle Augustine for his weaknesses. Yet Augustine is willing to make himself incredibly vulnerable in hopes that some might recognize that it is Christ who is responsible for the triumphs in all of our stories. Even Augustine admits to having once mocked the “healing prescriptions”²⁰ of Christ. He now realizes it was Christ who “had saved [him]

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.7.15.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.9.16.

from dying,"²¹ and it is evident that he risks telling his story with hope that others will recognize this as well.

Spiritual autobiographies give back to others what God has given to us by inspiring them with the truth of what God has done and can do through our example. Augustine actually gives us a beautiful picture of what it looks like to pass along to others the "bounty"²² God has given us when he describes the relationship he had with his mother and nurses as an infant.

You restrained me from craving more than you provided and inspired in those who nurtured me the will to give me what you were giving them, for their love for me was patterned on your law, and so they wanted to pass on to me the overflowing gift they received from you. It was a bounty for them, and a bounty for me from them; or, rather, not from them but only through them, for in truth all good things are from you, O God.

Though perhaps not his intention, Augustine paints a stunning picture of the relationship we have to others in the passing on of our stories. When we receive insight into the story God is

²¹ Ibid., 5.9.16.

²² Ibid., 1.6.7.

writing in our own lives and then pass that story on to others, it brings with it a bounty of hope and encouragement. Our stories can nourish other souls.

Our personal narratives can also point to ultimate reality by casting a bright light on all the false realities we encounter along our path home. With the gift of hindsight, Augustine is able to look back throughout his entire journey and see how his years of suppressing the truth had caused him to wander so far from God. He traded the truth he had learned as a boy and fell into a “set of proud madmen”²³ and Manichean philosophy. The Manichees had promised reality, but Augustine now sees that “the truth had no place in them.”²⁴ He laments to God, “They told me lies, not only about You, who are the only Truth, but also about the elements of this world and your creation.”²⁵ We see all the pain and regret that his poor choices have caused him, and he sacrifices them to God in a beautiful act of worship. In humble repentance, Augustine asks, “Allow me this, I beg you, and grant me to trace today the twisting arguments that led

²³ Ibid., 3.6.10.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.6.10.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.6.10.

me astray at that past time, shouting my joy to you as I offer you this sacrifice."²⁶ Not only is confessing in this way cleansing and transformative for Augustine, but it is possible it might inspire others to avoid making some of the same mistakes.

We can see through *The Confessions* how the relatable, personal and experiential aspects of his story candidly and unapologetically point to the truest story as revealed through Christ, who is the Ultimate Reality. While all other stories are "empty dishes of glittering myths,"²⁷ Christ is the True Myth made of flesh and blood. It is the grip of His consummate right hand for which all of our stories reach. In Christ the Logos "are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge . . . Moses wrote of him; Christ told us so himself, and he is the Truth."²⁸ In an astonishing act of vulnerability, Christ plunged himself into our stories and cast himself as one of us, enduring ridicule and mockery and the weight of sin and brokenness. He did this so that His life story would sing the song of truth to our ears. The Maker of heavens and earth became a pilgrim

²⁶ Ibid., 4.1.1.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.6.10.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.70.

wanderer, journeying far from the comforts of heaven, so he might restore order to our disoriented lives and bring us home.

May our own life stories be marked by humble confession. As we seek purifying repentance before God, our hearts will be necessarily translucent, allowing others to see through our stories to the reality of Christ. May we be fired to imitate Christ, confessing to the world with our very lives that our home is not to be found in Ithaca, or the beauty of a garden, or in any thing of this earth. Our journey ends with Christ himself. For “He has been mercifully hovering over the dark chaos of our inner being. By this we have received, even on our pilgrim way, pledge that we are children of the light already. Saved only in hope we may be, but we are at home in the light and in the day.”²⁹ The promise placed inside all of our stories is that “Life has come down to us.”³⁰ It is this very truth that Augustine implores all of us to share: “This is what you must tell them, to move them to tears in this valley of weeping, and by this means carry them off with you to God.”³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 10.14.15.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.12.18.

³¹ Ibid., 4.12.18.

Bibliography

Augustine's The Confessions: The Power of Spiritual Autobiography

Augustine. *Augustine: The Confessions*. ed. John E. Rotelle. trans. Maria Boulding. Hyde Park, NY. New City Press, 1997.