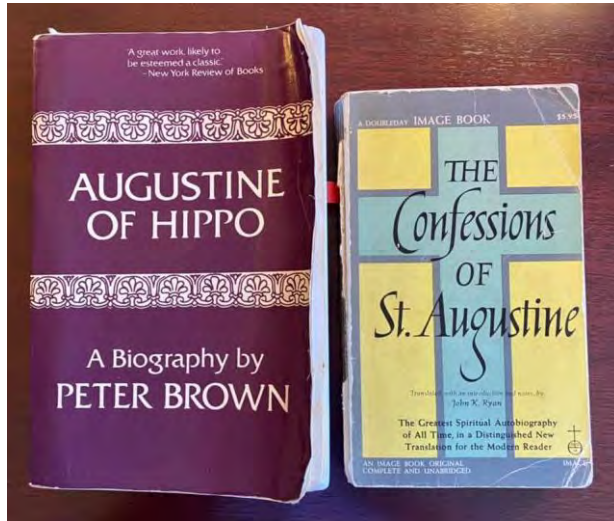


## My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 35

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Dante had a profound effect on my students. The imagery and symbolism embedded in the poem operated on the unconscious as well as the conscious levels of their thought. Once a person reads a text like the "Inferno," a gateway to another dimension of heart opens up. Even students who emphatically pushed themselves towards materialism and rebelliously celebrated atheism, couldn't escape the metaphorical pull of the "Commedia." The power of Dante operated subtly but insistently, like the Moon's pull on the seas. One of my students went off to Yale; his parents, Vietnamese refugees, expected that he would be a premed major. The pull of the "Commedia" proved too strong. He majored in Italian history and language, in order to read Dante in the original.

Only after he graduated from law school with honors did his mother forgive me. Another student finished college and journeyed to Italy to study Dante in a graduate program. One day in early May, upon completing his studies, he walked into my classroom, greeted me, and announced he had to show me something. He began to remove his shirt, and with all the scandals in the Catholic Church, I nearly ran out the door. But I held back as I saw tattooed across his heart, the opening six lines of the "Commedia," written in Dante's beautiful Italian. What greater gift could a former student give his old teacher?

Upon completion of our journey through Dante's "Inferno," I included a more modern work in my curriculum, one which depicted a similar theme to the "Divine Comedy" but with a more hopeful twist. "The Great Divorce," by CS Lewis, portrays a journey after death. The protagonist resides in a dark and damp city in the spiritual world, that sounds very much like a wintry London. The reader is not told it is hell, because in fact, it need not be. A flying bus takes a group of bickering passengers up and up into another dimension that is filled with light and beauty and love. Once they arrive, the passengers seem less substantial and appear to be ghosts. The residents of this other realm, family members or old friends of the bus passengers, essentially evangelize the new arrivals and encourage them to overcome their discomfort at being so exposed. The story becomes interesting as the various characters are overheard voicing their displeasure at this or that, recalling old resentments, gossiping about others, or wondering aloud how their greeter could possibly be here when they were residing in the spiritual equivalent of dank urban squalor. Whenever I read this novella, I think of the old quip about "Irish Alzheimers," a disease in which a person forgets everything but his grudges. In the end, each passenger has the choice, to go or stay, to accept or refuse the proffered love and forgiveness. 2,500 years ago, Heraclitus observed that "character is destiny." Many of the souls cherish their grudges, cannot bear the light, and determine to return to the spiritual squalor to which they're accustomed.

This led to lively discussions about the spiritual world and what occurs when we die, providing me an opening to lecture on the three stages of life, conveying Father's words as I had internalized them. The analogy between separation from the mother's womb and the death of our physical body, never failed to awaken my students to the possibility of an afterlife. And if Heraclitus was correct, and character is destiny, students had to examine how they were shaping their lives. Which in turn led us to a discussion

of conscience. Again, our Father's words provided profound insight into the importance of conscience as our First Teacher, and the internal compass which would direct us to True North, acting as the guarantor of our ultimate happiness.

These discussions paved the way for our reading of "The Confessions of St. Augustine." I would often assign this work over our Easter break, depending on when the holiday fell, as it varies each year. I first had everyone read excerpts from Peter Brown's excellent biography, "Augustine of Hippo." Brown's work provided a window into the Late Roman Empire of a population willfully oblivious to the Germanic tribes encroaching on their civilization, and living as if Roman hegemony would exist eternally. I intentionally drew parallels between Rome and America.

Augustine's "Confessions" are written as an extended prayer to God, in which he explores his life, revealing the recesses of his heart and mind. In my introduction to the work, I would emphasize that our original natures, our deepest desires and longings, remained the same as Augustine's, though the accidental circumstances of our lives were so very different. The questions raised by Augustine, his petty rebellions, his losses and gains, are not very different from those of a 21st Century person. That I was correct in my assertion, always seemed to surprise my students, who often journaled about similarities in thought, experience, or anxiety they discovered.

When we concluded reading the "Confessions," I would pass out excerpts from Augustine's message from the Spiritual World, as much as was palatable in a Catholic classroom. Even the portion I did pass out pushed the envelope of acceptability. However, the students were fascinated by this great Catholic saint's course of repentance, as he struggled to shed his self-centeredness.

Though Augustine's own life provides the subject matter, the star of the "Confessions" is Augustine's mother, St. Monica. Her constant prayer saves her wayward son. I think the story of Augustine's rebellion and his determined escape from his Catholic mother, should give every parent hope. Prayer remains our most powerful weapon in the struggle against sin, our own and other's. Particularly in this age, at this time in God's Providence, when women are assuming ownership of the work at hand, the Mother-Son unity behind Augustine's conversion provides us with a compelling model. In this dynamic relationship, the classical dictum, "character is destiny," is transcended by grace and the devoted heart of a faithful mother. The self-destructive course of the young man, Augustine, is altered as Monica appeals to God in prayer.