

“But Enough about Me”

What Does Augustine’s Confessions Have to Do with Facebook?

HOW TO LIVE WELL

In a *New Yorker* essay titled “But Enough About Me: What Does the Popularity of Memoirs Tell Us about Ourselves?” Daniel Mendelsohn notes that our culture is inundated with “unseemly self-exposures,” in a rich variety of forms: reality TV, addiction and recovery memoirs, Facebook, tales of sexual and physical abuse by parents, and so on. “The greatest outpouring of personal narratives in the history of the planet has occurred on the Internet,” which has provided a cheap and convenient means to broadcast one’s fascination with the self endlessly and without censorship.¹ This outlet for our narcissism is a new phenomenon, at least in its current breadth and depth: never have so many been able to share so shamelessly with so many others the secrets of their personal lives. There are several contributing factors to this situation, such as the blurring of the real and the artificial (does “reality” TV show “real” people?) as well as the confusion between private and public life (why are we forced to overhear private cell phone conversations in public places?).

Things used to be quite different—in fact, very different. Memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and journals were considered not only private but also questionable. They occupied an odd and ill-defined place among the various genres (history, fiction, philosophy). Were they “true” and if so, in what fashion? How do we know that people don’t “lie” (or are in denial) about their stories? Are these forms history or fiction? Are they closer to photographs or paintings? They are highly suspect these days too, because they assume a stable author with a privileged point of view, when in our postmodern context even the existence of a “subject” is questionable. So, why has the personal narrative gained such widespread popularity?

I suggest the reason is both simple and deep: personal narrative addresses the most central issue of human life—how to live well. Regardless of the

corrupt forms it has assumed in contemporary culture, it is concerned with the same question that motivated Augustine to write the *Confessions*: who am I and what should I be doing with my life? Whether this question takes the form of one of the greatest pieces of Western literature, as in the case of the *Confessions*, or a desperate report by a recovering alcoholic at an AA meeting, the intent is similar. How to live well?

This question has been at the heart of my own life and theology. Two essays, written almost forty years apart, one in 1970 and the other in 2008, illustrate my journey with this question. The first essay is a proposal for submission to a publisher, in which I outline one avenue for investigating the question of who we are and what we should do from a Christian perspective. While I never sent the outline to a publisher, I have taught a course (with many variations) on this topic since 1970 and have learned a great deal by doing so. I have come to the conclusion that that outline contained a germ for one way of addressing the question, a way that has parallels in most religious traditions, although I have conducted my investigation from within Christianity.

Before sharing this document, I would like to suggest why I think it might have contemporary relevance. We are facing an economic and environmental meltdown of more serious proportions than any generation of human beings before us. It is no exaggeration to speak in apocalyptic language, at the most elemental levels of basic physical needs, of the prospects for people and the planet. The years since the 2007 report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the 2008 crash of the stock market have opened our eyes to the seriousness of our planetary health at all levels and for all creatures. Every field of endeavor, including the religions, is being called on to offer its deepest and best thinking and action to address this crisis. In studies of the contributions by the sciences and technology, the closing sentence is often something like the following: “But of course it is really a spiritual problem—a problem of changing hearts and minds so that people will live differently.” And there is probably nothing more difficult or discouraging than such a conclusion, for people do not change easily. In fact, can they, will they, change at all—at least in ways sufficient to make a difference in the use and misuse of the planet’s resources? The answer may be no, in which case we may well be damned to a future we do not want to contemplate. However, many of us are not willing to accept this answer.

In the proposal I wrote almost forty years ago, I see a germ of an idea for us to consider, a germ I will call “kenosis,” or self-emptying, so that others may live. This “radical” stand can be found in different ways in many religious traditions, as well as in other fields of study, and it focuses on a portrait of human existence fundamentally at odds with the conventional assumption that human beings can be fulfilled by self-aggrandizement. It makes the outrageous claim that “to find one’s life one must lose it,” and it makes the further claim that this process contains an ethic not only for personal life

but also for public well-being. It makes this connection between the personal and the public on the basis of interrelationship in both religion and science: the transcendence of self-centeredness at the heart of the religions and the evolutionary reciprocity of all life forms at the biological level. Religion and economics also both underscore interdependence as the heart of well-being at personal and public levels.

It is important at the outset to distinguish ego from self. It is not easy to do so, given the myriad meanings used by different schools of psychology as well as common confusion between the terms. Thus the words *egocentric* and *self-centered* both refer to excessive focus on the self in a narcissistic fashion; however, *ego* is a narrower term and often a negative one (egotism, egomania, ego trip, etc.), while *self* has a broader range, all the way from self-abasement and self-satisfaction to self-discipline and self-fulfillment. (In fact, my dictionary contains over 150 hyphenated words beginning with *self*.) *Self* is a neutral term, veering toward the positive, whereas *ego* is a term veering toward the negative. It is important to distinguish the terms, since religious traditions have often been accused of negative forms of self-sacrifice, including ascetic and particularly female subordinationism. In the following chapters, *self-fulfillment* will play a major role, and it will be intimately related to *self-sacrifice* (kenosis). In other words, self-fulfillment is achieved through a form of self-sacrifice (or, perhaps more accurately, ego-sacrifice).

Here is the 1970 document, unedited and complete with masculine pronouns and a prefeminist consciousness!

Case Studies of Some Radical Christians

The question here might run something like this: What is the difference between a lukewarm and a radical Christian? The assumption is that most of us *are* lukewarm and stand in awe of Christians whose total lives are committed to Christ. This study is to be an inquiry into *how* and *why* certain Christians have taken radical stands. It is to investigate, by means of journals, letters, and papers written by the individuals, the actual process that eventuated in their radicalism. By “radicalism” I mean deep and abiding commitment and this refers to religious stands as well as social and political ones. “Radical” does not necessarily mean extreme, “left,” or odd, except according to “lukewarm” estimates, but as its derivation from root implies, radical has to do with depth, rather than any direction to the right or left of some imagined center.

It is the depth of commitment as it affects a mode of life, then, which we would investigate, and especially the *way* such commitment occurs. This will be approached through a study of a select number of writings of radical individuals in the hope of

discovering some of the “insides” of such commitment. Perhaps the finest text for such a study is the journal of the eighteenth-century Quaker John Woolman. Others that might be included are Bunyan, Sir Thomas More, the French novelist and essayist Leon Bloy, William Lloyd Garrison, Bonhoeffer—and I am on the lookout for others (especially contemporary men, though the right sort of texts are hard to come by). The study would by no means be historical in nature; it would, perhaps, be closer to psychology of religion. The method I have chosen has the advantage of being concrete, situational, and individual—it points a direct finger at the reader. It is difficult, for instance, to read Woolman’s journal which gives the portrait of a man of absolute integrity, wholly committed to the will of God, however unpopular that might cause him to be with his contemporaries (as it did cause him to be on the slave trade issue), without feeling a finger pointed at oneself. All the radical Christians with whom I would deal are worldly rather than ascetic; that is, they are involved in the public issues of their day and not merely in private sanctification.

The theological problem which lies behind this study and which prompted me to undertake it is the issue of God’s power and man’s will; that is, the age-old problem of how a man can say “all is of God” and “yet I will it too” or as Paul says in Gal.2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” There are, of course, many ways to tackle this problem, but one way is to see how it works out in actual lives which are totally committed to God and at the same time totally immersed in the historical ambiguities and complexities of real life. The supposition here is that reality is richer and more thought-provoking than theory. Both as an assumption of the study and an undercurrent within it, will be the suggestion that radical Christians, both religiously and socially, ought really to be called normative Christians, for what one sees immediately upon reading the texts mentioned is that religiously, such Christians are “fanatics” only in the sense of deep commitment to God and such total commitment to God gives them rare and clear insight into the just stance for the issues of their day, the issues of slavery, war, poverty, etc.

The point, then, of such a study is to help the Christian to get some perspective on his *own* “destiny,” that is, what God wills for him, what his world has made of him, and what he makes of himself—the total context in which and by which he has become *this* man and no other. The issue will be dealt with through case

studies; it will not be necessary to draw “conclusions,” but I will point up in detail how the destinies of certain totally committed Christians have unfolded. This method has some of the advantages of the sort of wisdom about human life and destiny one gains from reading novels, for it illumines through a story of a life, not through concepts. But it also has disadvantages, for just as the “point” of a novel is not in the conclusion or in any paraphrase of the theme, so the point of a study of the lives of the saints (for that is what it is) is in the study itself and not the conclusions. A life, like a work of art, cannot be summarized; it can be pointed to and highlighted, but the reader himself must get into the experience of another’s life or a work of art through empathy and imagination.

What are some of the features of this proposal that might address our economic and ecological crises? What might one religious perspective—a Christian one, with parallels in other religions—offer to the planetary conversation? I will mention a few: first, a redefinition of “normal” religious/Christian from its usual “lukewarm” character to “radical” as the new norm; second, a refocusing of religious/Christian concern from the “personal” to the “personal/public”; third, the redirection of the goal of human life from self-fulfillment to self-emptying, with the paradoxical assertion that divine empowerment and human fulfillment are the same; and, fourth, a reinterpretation of the form of ethical instruction from the essay to the life story, with the assumption that change or “conversion” is more likely to happen through the power of lived experience than the logic of argument.

These features have informed my theology over the last forty years, and in various books I have investigated different aspects of them. The present essay is intended to deal more directly with them, especially as they suggest an alternative to the reigning “anthropology of individualism,” which has reached its culmination in market capitalism and its mantra of more, more, more—an anthropology that is undercutting the health of our planet and the happiness of its human beings. The religions suggest a very different view of the abundant life, one capable of critiquing the model that market capitalism and its endless advertising campaigns promote as the “truth.” Probably the most serious conversation of our day is expressed in these questions: How should we live? How can we live well? Why are we here, and what should we be doing? Behind Augustine’s *Confessions* and at the base of numerous Facebook entries and agonizing addiction memoirs are the same questions. In times of great planetary crisis, they arise even more urgently, and ours is certainly such a time.

How might these features of my humble, embryonic, perhaps “naive” proposal from forty years ago help us answer these questions in such a way as to benefit not only our personal fulfillment but also the planet’s well-being?

A second essay, a sermon delivered nearly four decades later, picks up on these four themes, but with more depth and from a twenty-first-century perspective.

A Sermon on Kenosis

I am teaching a course this semester on spiritual autobiography. I have taught it many times; in fact, it may be the first course I taught over forty years ago. It is about folks like Teresa of Avila, John Woolman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Mohandas Gandhi, Jean Vanier, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Dorothy Day, people who live lives of extraordinary love for others, especially the weak and vulnerable. I always find new insights teaching the course, and this year is no exception. I have been struck by a characteristic shared by many of them, the rather shocking practice of self-emptying, of what the Christian tradition has called “kenosis.” The text from Philippians sums it up well: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” What an inversion this is of triumphal, imperialistic views of Christianity!

The reason I am struck by self-emptying is because I believe it suggests an ethic for our time, a time that is characterized by climate change and financial chaos. These two related crises are the result of excess, our insatiable appetites that are literally consuming the world. We are debtors twice over—financially and ecologically. The very habits that are causing the financial crisis are also destroying the planet. We are living way beyond our means at all levels: our personal credit cards, the practices of the financial lending institutions, and the planet’s resources that support all of us.

Could the crazy notion of self-emptying, a notion found in different forms in many religious traditions, be a clue to what is wrong with our way of being in the world as well as a suggestion of how we might live differently? Whether in Buddhism’s release from desire by nonattachment or Christianity’s admonition that to find one’s life one must lose it, religions are often countercultural in their various ethics of self-denial for the sake of genuine fulfillment. While in some religious traditions, such self-denial moves into asceticism and life-denial, this is not usually the underlying assumption.

I am thinking of John Woolman, an eighteenth-century American Quaker who had a successful retail business and gave it up because he felt it kept him from clearly seeing something that disturbed him: slavery. He came to see how money stood in the way of clear perception of injustice: people who had a lot of property and land needed slaves to maintain them (or so these folks reasoned). He saw the same problem with his own reasoning—he said his “eye” was not single because whenever he looked at an injustice in the world he always saw it through his own eye, his own situation and benefit. It was as if he had double vision. If he was able to move himself out of the center, then his eye became “single.” Once he reduced his own level of prosperity, he could see the clear links between riches and oppression. He wrote: “Every degree of luxury has some connection with evil.”² Reduction of his lifestyle gave him insight into the difference between “needs” and “wants,” something our insatiable consumer culture has made it almost impossible to recognize. As an ethic for a time of climate change, Woolman suggests the clarity of perception into others’ “needs” that can come about through the reduction of one’s own “wants.”

However, Woolman did not find such self-emptying negative or depressing; rather, he found it fulfilling. He has a dream in which he hears the words “John Woolman is dead” and realizes, now that his own will is dead he can say with Paul that he is crucified with Christ, that Christ might live in him. We find ourselves by losing ourselves. That deeper desire is the desire for God, for nothing less will fill the hunger in us. Augustine says that we are drawn to God as a sheep is drawn to a leafy branch or a child to a handful of nuts. To empty the self is not an act of denial, but of fulfillment, for it creates space for God to fill one’s being. We are satisfied by nothing less than God; our deepest desire is to be one with God, even as Jesus was. Made in the image of God, our destiny is to become one with God, so that we too can say, not my will but God’s be done. This is not a loss, but again, the greatest gain.

What we see here is not an ascetic call for self-denial to purify ourselves or even a moral injunction to give others space to live; rather, it is more basic. It is an invitation to imitate the way God loves the world. In the Christian tradition, kenosis, or self-emptying, is a way of understanding God’s actions in creation, the incarnation, and the cross. In creation, God limits the divine self, pulling in, so to speak, to allow space for others to exist. God, who is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, does not take all the space but gives space and life to others. This

is an inversion of the usual understanding of power as control; instead, power is given to others to live as diverse and valuable creatures. In the incarnation, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:7, God “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” substituting humility and vulnerability for our insatiable appetites. In the cross, God gives of the divine self without limit to side with the poor and the oppressed. God does not take the way of the victor, but like Jesus and the temptations, rejects absolute power and imperialism for a different way. Therefore, Christian discipleship becomes a “cruciform” life, imitating the self-giving of Christ for others.

Another example of kenotic living is the case of the French philosopher and unbaptized Catholic Simone Weil. She lived a radical and brief life of solidarity with her poorest and often starving fellow citizens during World War II. She practiced what she called “decreation,” a form of self-emptying in which she sees herself diminish as God grows in her. Decreation, or the death of the will, is giving up control over one’s life, so that God can subvert the self’s exorbitant and constantly growing desires. The point is not mortification but a discipline of emptying herself so that God can be all in all. To eat when and what one wants when others are starving is a symbol of control over finitude, of exceptionalism, which she refused to embrace. Food is a symbol of basic physical limits, and unless we can limit our own voracious appetites, we will not be able to attend to the hunger in others—their abject suffering, both physical and emotional. Our tendency is to love others because of our needs, not theirs, our hunger, not their hunger. Our fat, relentless egos want more, more, more: this is the insatiability of the consumer culture, which has resulted in climate change and more recently in financial collapse.

Simone Weil says that human beings are naturally “cannibalistic”: we eat instead of looking, we devour rather than paying attention, we consume other people and the planet in our search for self-fulfillment. Augustine claimed something similar in his understanding of sin: voracious, lustful desire to have it all for oneself. From the twenty-first-century ecological perspective, sin is refusing to share, refusing to live in such a way that others—other people and other life-forms—can also live. For us in our time, sin is refusing to live justly and sustainably with all others on our planet. It is refusing to share the banquet of life.

This is not a new understanding of sin; rather, it is built upon the traditional view that, as Augustine puts it, sin is “being curved in upon oneself” rather than being open to God. In our ecological age, we now see that “being open to God” means being open to the

other creatures, upon whom we depend and who depend upon us. We cannot love God unless we love God’s world. Christians have always known this, because an incarnate God is a world-loving God; but now it takes on new meaning and depth as we realize the radical interrelationship and interdependence of all forms of life.

As with Woolman, the problem as Weil understands it is the inability to really see others. She writes: “The only people who have any hope of salvation are those who occasionally stop and look for a time, instead of eating.”³ The United Nations Earth Charter, a document that lays out principles for a just, sustainable planet, agrees. Its first principle reads: “Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.” An ethic of self-emptying begins with the recognition that something besides oneself really exists and needs the basics of existence.

Paying attention to others, looking not eating, is a somber, thoughtful ethic for our time of climate change. Put simply, climate change is the result of too many human beings using too much energy and taking up too much space on the planet. “Environmentalism” is not simply about maintaining green spaces in cities or national parks; rather, it is the more basic issue of energy use on a finite planet. Thus space and energy, the basic physical needs of all creatures—a place to live and the energy to sustain life day by day—is the issue. In other words, the crisis facing us is one of geography, one of space and place and habitability. It is not about time and history and human meaning; rather, it is physical, earthly, worldly, fleshly—the basics of existence. Christianity has often focused on time, history, and human meaning; for example, salvation has been understood to be eternal existence in another world for individual human beings. But an “incarnational” Christianity, a Christianity that believes in an incarnate God who loves the world and inhabits the world, is radically mundane. In Irenaeus’s wonderful words: “The glory of God is every creature fully alive.”

This is a strange “crisis” to face: it does not have the immediacy of a war or plague or tsunami. Rather, it has to do with “how we live” on a daily basis—the food we eat, the transportation we use, the size of the house we live in, the consumer goods we buy, the luxuries we allow ourselves, the amount of long-distance air travel we permit ourselves, and so forth. We are not being called to take up arms and fight an enemy; rather, the enemy is the very ordinary life we ourselves are leading as well-off North Americans. And yet, for all its presumed innocence, this way of life, multiplied by

billions of people, is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us all.

A very different form of life is suggested by another extraordinary Christian. Dorothy Day, who identified totally with the abject poverty of people in the ghettos of New York City during the Great Depression, lived a life of joyful sharing, a form of the abundant life totally contrary to our consumer understanding. If Woolman and Weil belong to the prophetic strain in Christianity, the strain that underscores the way to God through self-emptying, Day belongs to the sacramental path that, while acknowledging self-emptying, revels in the fulfillment that follows. She found the abundant life in voluntary poverty: she did indeed find her life by losing it, and it was a rich, full, joyful life. In the postscript to her autobiography, she writes of her community:

We were just sitting there talking when lines of people began to form, saying, "We need bread." We could not say, "Go, be thou filled." If there were six small loaves and a few fishes, we had to divide them. There was always bread. . . . There is always room for one more; each of us will have a little less. . . . We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.⁴

GOD'S CALL, OUR RESPONSE

The kenotic paradigm in Woolman, Weil, and Day is not for the sake of asceticism or self-flagellation. It is not a negative statement about the earth and life; rather, it is the recognition that life's flourishing on earth demands certain limitations and sacrifices at physical and emotional levels. The ego that demands everything for itself—honor, power, money—is the same cannibalistic self that devours all the food and land. As St. Francis well knew, "possessionlessness" is a matter of the spirit and the body: it demands giving up not only some of one's possessions but also one's claim of exceptionalism. While the self-emptying pattern might have been seen in other times as a peculiarly religious way of being in the world, I think we can now see how it might be the germ of a personal, professional, and public ethic for the twenty-first century.

Two things characterize our time: first, an awareness of our radical interdependence on all other life-forms—as evident in the vital climatic system of our planet—and second, an increasing appreciation of the planet's finitude and vulnerability. These two realities of our time mean that the vocabulary of

self-limitation, egolessness, sharing, giving space to others, and limiting our energy use no longer sounds like a special language for the saints, but rather, as an ethic for all of us. The religions may be the greatest “realists,” with their intuitive appreciation for self-emptying and self-limitation as a way not only to personal fulfillment but also to sane planetary practice. Could it be that the religions might take the lead in exploring and illustrating how an ethic of self-limitation might function in light of the twenty-first-century crisis of climate change? The banquet of which Dorothy Day speaks—the banquet of heaven and the banquet of earth—is an inclusive feast. As she writes of it: “There is always room for one more; each of us will have a little less.”

These two essays of mine, written forty years apart, sum up my own personal and public journey with the question, How to live well? How should we live? Theologian John Caputo expresses the depths of this question with exceptional power.

God calls us before we call upon God, calling up what is best or highest in us. In that sense, God pursues us, preys upon us, or even prays to us, inasmuch as God calls upon, provokes, and invokes us. The name of God is the name of what we desire, of everything that we desire, but it is also the name of what desires us, of what desires everything of us. . . . We are called by God, which is our vocation, even as we call upon God, which is our invocation. We subsist in the space between these calls.⁵

We exist between God’s desire for us and our responding desire for God, and as Caputo says, the name of God is the name of what we desire, of our deepest desire. (Everyone may not use the same name for this desire—we may not all use the term *God* for this desire, though as a Christian, I do use this term.) What we wish for most deeply is at the same time what we ought to do: respond to God’s call to us. This journey is what human life is all about: finding fulfillment by doing God’s will. We know deep within ourselves that we are not living as we ought, but what comes as a surprise is the discovery that our duty and our desire are one. We desire what desires us, and it is in the concrete living out of our response—our yes to God’s Yes—that we become who we want to be and were meant to be.

Spiritual autobiography is the attempt to understand and strengthen our response to God’s call, to the deepest call, which we experience as both delight and duty. It is an opportunity to see more clearly and to embody more fully the particular call made to each of us. How can my life be a reflection of divine love in this time and place? The classic Christian phrase for discipleship—the imitation of Christ—means that we were made by God to become like God, loving all others, loving universally. One’s life story is never finished, for we are always in the process of participating in the goal of human life—to be made in God’s image (as Genesis reminds us). Presumably, this process continues

after death, when we shall be even more fully one with God. Attention to one's spiritual autobiography asks: What are you called to do? How are you to find fulfillment and happiness? The two questions are really one, for we exist between God's desire for us and our desire for God.

Hence, I have come to see in my decades of studying spiritual autobiography that this is not an avocation—a hobby or sideline—but the major task of our lives. Hence, for me, the goal of spirituality, spiritual autobiography, spiritual direction, and prayer is not primarily to achieve an experience of God; rather, we engage in these activities in order to understand more clearly what we are called to do in the world. Put as simply as possible, how do we “love the neighbor” appropriately, helpfully, fully, in our time and place? What does it mean, as privileged persons in developed countries, to do so at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Each of us lives out our discipleship, our response to God's call, in concrete, particular circumstances. For John Woolman, it was eighteenth-century American slavery; for Simone Weil, it was the oppression and hunger of World War II; for Dorothy Day, it was the slums of New York City during the Depression. To quote Caputo again: “The name of God is the name of a deed.” Religion is not primarily about correct belief but about committed and appropriate practice. The vocation, the call, the context comes first. Not, Who is God—or, Who am I—but, What does God require of me, of us, in this particular time and place? Spiritual growth begins with the call to live differently. Sometimes it is nothing more than the sense that things are not right, that I am not living as I should, as I want to. It is the sense that a different world is possible, a sense of disjunction between what is and what ought to be.

What needs to be done? What ought I do? What ought we to do? By grace, by God's love, we respond to the call—spirituality is allowing God to shape us so we can do the work we are called to do. How can we respond to the suffering of the world in our time and place? What are the practices that helped Woolman live a life of discipleship fighting slavery in eighteenth-century America? What is the understanding of God and the world that pressed Simone Weil to identify completely with those starving during World War II? What are the thoughts and actions that lay behind Day's life of total commitment to the poorest people of New York City during the Depression?

SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

More specifically, what theology and practices do we need in order to face the quintessential problems of the twenty-first century, epitomized in climate change and economic meltdown? How can spiritual autobiography be a useful source for answering these questions? It would seem that the personal, idiosyncratic, and often narcissistic style of autobiography would be the

last place to look for insight on our major planetary crises. As Facebook and “reality” TV illustrate, much contemporary autobiography displays the worst of the individualistic, selfish, consumer orientation of our culture. Is autobiography not the very thing we most need to avoid? If the present spate of outlets like Facebook and reality TV and addiction and abuse memoirs were the only kind of autobiography available, this would certainly be the case. But since the earliest appearance of the genre, it has come in two major forms: the Rousseauian and the Augustinian. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* in the eighteenth century shocked his contemporaries with lurid descriptions of his “masturbation and masochism,” which were the equals of Oprah-like confessions of present daytime television.⁶ But a much older form of autobiography—the “vocational”—presents a radically different reason for telling one’s personal story and the goal of doing so. Augustine’s *Confessions*, written centuries earlier, was the answer to his agonizing question of who God is to him and who he is to God—“For Thy mercies’ sake, O Lord my God, tell me what Thou art to me.”⁷ In addition to clarifying his own journey, Augustine states that it might also be of use to others as they attempt to do the same thing. (I read it in college, and to my delight and wonder, I found that the centuries-old questions of this African bishop spoke directly to my own “sophomoric” agonies, an experience that witnesses to the power of this book.) The Augustinian model of autobiography lies behind the myriad of personal, spiritual stories through the centuries—from those of medieval saints such as Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola to John Bunyan and hundreds of Puritan confessions lamenting sins and asking for God’s grace. And behind all of these autobiographies lies the “confessional” practice of the Catholic Church: the recitation of sins and the search for forgiveness. Moreover, the vocational autobiography also served as the prototype of the Western novel, with its classic theme of young men searching for the meaning of their destiny—from Dickens to vampire stories. (Who I am and what I should be doing in the world finally crosses the species line!)

Both of these forms of autobiography focus on the self, but with radically different understandings—the Rousseauian is interested in the self because it is *my* self (who I am is important because it is about me), while the Augustinian model is interested in the self because the self must respond to a call (who I am is critical because it is the way I will know how to answer the question of what I should do). Both forms witness to the inescapability of the question that lies behind all other questions—it is not a “religious” or “secular” question, but a *human* question. As Annie Dillard puts it, “We wake, if we wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence. . . . ‘Seem like we’re just set down here,’ a woman said to me recently, ‘and don’t nobody know why.’”⁸ Indeed, that says it all. The two types of autobiography suggest two very different answers to the question of “why we are here”: the first says that we are here to fulfill our own desires, as insatiable and outrageous as they might be (as long

as we stay within the law), while the second says that we are here to respond to a “call,” to something beyond ourselves that is both our deepest desire and our most profound duty (though we may not realize how these come together).

If the second type of autobiography is, in fact, at the heart of human existence, then surely those institutions (often, but not solely, religious) that press the question of why we are here would do so, not at a lukewarm but at a radical level. The question is not marginal, easy to answer, or some combination of indifference and convention; rather, the only answers worthy of consideration are radical—they get at the heart of things, press us to the limit, lead us to extremes. It is also not surprising to find that one of the most widespread answers to the question of how we should live makes the shocking suggestion that self-fulfillment rests on self-emptying (a radical move, to say the least). We can also see here how this movement—from a lukewarm to a radical, self-emptying ethics—results in a public as well as a personal answer to the call. To see the self as part of a network that includes all other life and its well-being means that answering the call to who we are in the scheme of things is a public—indeed, a political—move. Finally, this understanding of the self is terribly difficult not only to “understand” but also to put into practice. In fact, one of the reasons for the existence of autobiography as a genre is the realization that life stories are more effective in moving people toward change than logical arguments. Most religious traditions depend on parables, stories, and confessions, which show lives lived in this radical, self-emptying way, rather than on essays advocating its acceptance. There is probably nothing more difficult in the world than change at this level, change at the level of what we think our lives are “about.” Which is why the language of “conversion,” of “rebirth” has been used to express it. We will do almost anything to avoid facing this question, and our advertising consumer culture reinforces this avoidance, shouting at us with thousands of ads daily telling us that “nothing is too good for you” and that “you owe it to yourself to have the very best” (the Lexus, the trip to Paris, etc.).

Whether one thinks of Augustine or Woolman or Day, each of their stories becomes a form of pedagogy, an illustration, a way of overcoming the chasm between belief and lifestyle. They become for us a version of the “lives of the saints,” reflecting on the way great religious leaders and activists have incarnated the gospel in their own personal and public lives. “A saint is a person so grasped by a religious vision that it becomes central to his or her life in a way that radically changes the person and leads others to glimpse the value of that vision.”⁹ They see their own lives as instruments of God; hence, one sees in their autobiographies the paradox of self and selflessness—pointing away from the self through the self. The goal is to point *away* from the self to God—and to the reader. This brings us to the point of why read spiritual autobiographies, apart from the pleasure of reading some great classics. Here *we* are called into question; our personal and vocational lives, our public

commitments, come under review. We read the stories of others—we pass over into their lives—in order to pass back into our own and reflect more carefully on them. Does one live according to one's beliefs? Is one only a private Christian (or religious adherent)? Is there in these stories a clue to how private passion and public social change might come together?

CONCLUSION

We have looked at the rise of interest in personal narratives of all sorts in our time—at the fascination and at times obsession with telling one's story in all its details, the more sordid the better, with instant technology like Facebook and Twitter. While it is easy to dismiss this phenomenon as yet another form of juvenile narcissism, we have seen that it masks a deep need in human beings to answer the most eternal and difficult of all questions: How to live well? From our ancestors huddled around campfires telling stories of coping with natural catastrophes and the death of children to contemporary teenagers contemplating suicide and grandparents rejoicing in yet another day to live on planet earth, people cannot avoid the question of how to live well at both personal and public levels. We do not arrive on earth with "instructions" (as most other animals do) on what we should do during our brief sojourns here; rather, we are "just set down here" . . . "and don't nobody know why." Moreover, what we, living in the twenty-first century, are coming to realize is that we are "set down" in an extremely dangerous and anxious time, as evidenced by massive economic and ecological issues, affecting us deeply at both personal and public levels. The question of how to live well cannot be now (if it ever was) a question of individual well-being; it is that, but it is also a public and a political question. Thus every field of study, every religion, every institution—as well as every individual—is called to marshal its best insights and proposals to address this multidimensional question. The religions have, I think, a special reason to do so, since time and again thinkers and writers have identified these economic and ecological issues as "spiritual" as well as technological, financial, and political.

Barry Lopez sums up the challenge facing us as a culture and as individuals. He also reminds us of the humility necessary as we attempt to answer that challenge.

No culture has yet solved the dilemma each has faced with the growth of the conscious mind: how to live a more compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in all life, when one finds darkness not only in one's own culture but within oneself. . . . There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of a leaning into the light.¹⁰

NOTES

¹Daniel Mendelsohn, "But Enough About Me," *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010, 68.

²John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman and A Plea for the Poor* (New York: Corinth, 1961), 46.

³Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 286.

⁴Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 317–18.

⁵John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 122.

⁶Mendelsohn, "But Enough About Me," 68.

⁷*The Confessions of St. Augustine, Books I-X*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward), 1.5.

⁸Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 2, 12.

⁹Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 65.

¹⁰Quoted in F. Lynne Bachleda, *Blue Mountain: A Spiritual Anthology Celebrating the Earth* (Birmingham: Menasha Ridge, 2000), 118.