

Obligated to Love (On Some Words of Augustine)

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We should not look idly on the beauty of the sky, the orderly arrangement of the stars, the brightness of the light, the alternations of days and nights, the monthly courses of the moon, the fourfold divisions of the year, ... the great potency of seeds.... When we consider these things, we should not indulge in any light-minded and unprofitable curiosity; instead, we should take a step toward immortal things, which remain forever.¹

Those words were written sixteen hundred years ago by Augustine, the namesake of this College, and they contain the difference between this college (and the handful of schools that are like it) and the majority of universities and colleges today.

They seem also to contain a rather blunt intrusion into our freedom. We are alone, looking idly on the beauty of the sky – *and we can't? We can't just look?*

They also contain the essence of the trouble we are in, in the world. A trouble that is growing, as we drift further and further from the tradition of which Augustine was one of the great architects.

Let me offer a few thoughts on Augustine's words, and make a crude thumbnail sketch of the tradition he helped to build, on the foundation of Scripture. I believe I can use these words as an introduction to Augustine College and the college year that is commencing today.

“We should not look idly on the beauty of the sky, the orderly arrangement of the stars, the brightness of the light, the alternations of days and nights....” How should we “not look idly” on these things?

Augustine says, ‘don’t look idly’. What, even, does that mean?

Well, that is the question. Some people say – Augustine is one of them – that some kinds of looking are idle. Don’t *look* idly. – Don’t *think* idly. *Talk* idly. *Wonder* idly. *Play* idly. *Suffer* idly. *Write* idly.

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What does it mean, to be idle? That, we know. It is to sit around when there is something to be done.

Don’t make the mistake that so many people have made: don’t hear that distinction and then shout, ‘Aha! Augustine says that idleness is bad – and I know very well that that is false: there are days when idleness is the very thing the soul needs – so, Augustine, I reject your distinction between idle and productive as I reject all your frowning, repressive distinctions!’

Don’t be stupid, like the people who think like that. Augustine knew the good of idleness. But what he is really saying is, don’t even be idle idly.

Don’t exist, as if there isn’t something to do. And the thing there is to do is not out in some

sphere of action awaiting you, say, in the Third World, or in the inner city, or in politics, or wherever. It is there with you wherever you are: barreling with you down the freeway, plodding along the sidewalk with you in the November grey, lying awake with you in the dead of winter. Idle looking is looking without doing what is to be done whenever there is something in front of you to look at, which is always.

An obligation, when you have merely opened your eyes?!

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There is a spirit in many people that bucks and kicks at an idea like that. That is all some people have to hear to commit themselves to the cause of fighting enemies like Augustine, who rush at them with manacles and chains – because that is what the idea of ‘obligation’ means to them.

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But there is presumption in thinking that, isn’t there? *What is* the presumption, in thinking that an obligation is a manacle and a chain?

How do we know that the obligation, the duty that calls, isn’t the duty of love? How do we know that the thing that is saying ‘Hey!’ to us isn’t a thing that we could love?

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Now think about things that you love. Is loving them an imposition on you? Do you feel chains and manacles in these things? Your love of them may indeed burden you with things that you don’t feel like doing: cleaning-up after, getting out of bed for, forgiving, etc. My temptation here was to say that the parents among us know all

about this – but the children know all about it too. All the children know about being burdened with things they don’t feel like doing, but do out of love.

Your love may burden you with things you would not choose to do on your own, but do, and do willingly. But what about the love itself? Is that a burden? A chain and a manacle? No. It is a blessing.

Every love is a blessing, *a blessing*: the kind of thing that tells you what you are here for.

Chains keep us from running away to these loved things; it is these things that tell us *what chains are*. So love cannot bring chains and manacles. And if there is an obligation to love – if that idea amounts to anything – then it just can’t be that an obligation that falls on us, when we have merely opened our eyes, is anything to be wary of.

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What has this got to do with Augustine College? Well let’s continue our walk, until we get to the gates of this college. At a certain point I think we are all going to see them.

Augustine is saying that there is a way you ought to look at things. There is an ‘ought’ that gets in ahead of all the other ‘oughts’ – like the ought of that person keeping his eye peeled for chains and manacles.

After all, isn’t that person – the one who doesn’t want to submit to any obligation – a person with his own ‘ought’? ‘I ought to be free to live as I wish’: that’s what he is thinking. That’s what keeps him vigilant and wary of chain-rattlers like

Augustine, talking about obligations all around us.

Augustine is saying that there is a way we ought to look at things: that as soon as you open your eyes, for the very first time, there is an ought already waiting for you. And we have opened our eyes many, many times before the idea of this ought ever dawns on us, if it ever does.

And so we have already come up with *plenty* of ways of looking at things ... before it ever dawns on us that there might be some way we *ought* to look at them.

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An illustration: take people. How do we look at them? How have we, historically? How have we, in our own past lives? How *do* we look at people?

Pretty commonly, we look at a person from the standpoint of how they might serve us – maybe how they ought to serve us, because, this is my wife, or my child, or my boss, or a public servant who has the word ‘servant’ in his actual title. These people owe me.

When you look at people in that way, from the standpoint of how they might serve you, often what you find yourself looking at is a disappointment. Sometimes you just have to catch those familiar facial features entering your field of vision to feel it: their faces turn into emblems of disappointment.

Should we be looking at people in that way? Is there a way in which we *ought* to look at them?

Why do people exist? Do they exist to serve us in these ways we are thinking about? Here they are on earth: you know they exist – your

consciousness is filled with them. *Why* are they here? *Why* do they *exist*?

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So now we see there are ways to look. And we have raised the possibility that our habitual way of looking might have cut in ahead of another way of looking that really does have priority over our little wants, because it has to do with why these people, these creatures, these things exist. Start with why this person exists: *then* look at them.

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There you have it in a nutshell: the heart of the Western tradition.

Don’t just look: think about what you are looking at. What *is it*? What does it mean, *that it exists*?

What is this human being? Why is she here?

Get out of the tomb of your pleasures, which is very dark, and try to see what is before you. Don’t just look – don’t just open your eyes and take it in. See. Augustine writes, “To have eyes is not the same as to look; similarly, looking is not the same thing as seeing.”²

If you just look, if you just open your eyes and take things in, you are passively consigning yourself and the things before you to the given current that you are in. Really, you are hunting for what the master inside you has sent you after – but you think you are just looking.

Don’t just look but wake up to all that is going on when you ‘just look’, lulled into the thought that you are being yourself, and watching out for chains, and protecting your freedom.

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You see, when I say this, that I am not talking about secular people (Christians talk far too much about secular people). I am talking about *people*. The person who is saying, ‘Get away from me with your chains and your manacles’ is *every* person.

And this is more of a problem for the Christian, because the thing that is calling to be seen is God in His glory. It is God’s world. God put the husband and the wife and the child and the employee on this earth, *as* something. The star and the tree and the protein and the story and the f-sharp minor chord: it is God who set this up.

The Christian is a person who claims to love God. But the Christian who does not have the attitude that Augustine is urging on us – don’t just open your eyes and take it in, don’t look idly: which really means, don’t look as you are wound up to look in your historic disorder, the blind state constantly noted in the Gospels – ... that Christian is really saying to God, ‘Get away from me with your chains and your manacles.’ The secular person, at least, is caught in no such contradiction.

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Don’t look idly: try to see what is before you.

We want to say, ‘But in trying to see, I am going to be using a sinful mind.’

What – there’s nothing left of what God put in there?! Man could *destroy* what God made?

Listen to what Augustine is saying: *use God’s gift* to see what is before you. Again, I quote, “To

have eyes is not the same as to look” – use the eyes you have, he is saying.

Use them, to answer the question, *what* is this person? *Why* does this person exist? *What makes* him or her a person, and not an animal, or some other thing? Are these questions that cannot be answered by a sinful mind? The sinful mind is the one that gives excuses for not bothering.

The Christian who thinks such questions cannot be answered is a lot closer to the secular person of our day than he is to Augustine, or to Christ, or to the hands that drafted Genesis.

Let God’s gift – the word for that is *grace* – change you, give you light, lift you out of your darkness. Turning to God is also thinking about what is before you. Asking questions. Seeking answers that are trustworthy. Seeking good answers.

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And what if you do this?

If you look at things as you ought to look at them – if, gradually, the light gets into your eyes – you will see the glory of God in them. If you can escape the mechanism by which you are looking now, things will declare the glory of God to you. There are no manacles in that.

The more you can see, the more you will know the blessedness of existence. What things call out to show you is what you are really seeking when you are trying to keep all the things you don’t like away from you. ‘I ought to be free to chase what I like,’ we say to ourselves, every day, all the time. And we do it by pushing away things that, if we saw them, would not fail to increase our love of God. Things would stand

before us as blessings: as our children do, when we see them; as our wives do, when we see them; as our enemies do, when we see them.

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So when Augustine says, don't "look idly on the beauty of the sky," he is not saying, don't look at the sky and not notice how beautiful it is. He is saying still more: don't look at the beauty of the sky in an idle way; don't fail to ask what this beauty is – why there is beauty at all; what kind of a world this is, that looks like this.

Don't just snap these things up – don't swallow beauties as experiences, as moments of enhanced quality.

Do not look idly on the beauty of music. *Why* is there music?

Mull over the brilliance of this particular historical solution to the puzzle of the strange movements of the stars.

Consider the beauty of this Latin grammar, which expresses itself with such meaningful elegance.

Return again and again to the beauty of one person acknowledging, in speech, the true image, the image of God, in another.

Take to heart the beauty of effort: a lone person struggling, on her own, to overcome her own accursed weakness.

Drink in the beauty of Christ's words: not just the imagery he employs, but the picture of the world that a world that can furnish such imagery draws for us.

Dwell on the beauty of arriving, all of us together, at a conclusion that we now see,

together, to be true – whereas each of us set out, earlier, in our own special fog.

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Some of you know what I have just done: I have just run through our curriculum. It is a curriculum of *liberal arts* – which Augustine called "the supreme studies."³

We are not, at Augustine College, teaching the 'subjects' of art, music, science, Latin, literature, philosophy, Scripture, logic – we can't do that and help ourselves to the word 'supreme'. Is it supreme every time you pick up a book on art or science? Hardly. It is usually idle nonsense.

Dispel the fog about what the liberal arts are: they are "the supreme studies" because, if they are taught as what they *are* they help us to look in a way that is not idle.

They help us to look at what is – a progression of chords, a stand of trees, people, language, the world and what it contains – ... they help us to look at what is as *what it is*. And what things are, is, things that declare the glory of God. They declare it by pointing. Whether they point to it or away from it, they declare it.

The liberal arts are not so much about knowledge, which might be steeped in what Augustine called "light-minded ... curiosity." They are about what is important: "immortal things," Augustine said, "which remain forever." "The supreme studies" are about the supreme things, which things all around us *want* to bring us to.

The heavens *want* to tell us of the glory of God. But we want to get take-out, with our head bent

down to our shoes, as we think for the fifth time of what so-and-so did.

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But you can't fix that just by glancing up and seeing the beauty draped over your head, pocketing its gorgeousness – as if it were put there for that. Augustine says the divine spirit “bids” us not to snatch at what is around us; instead, it says, “mount upward to the intellect”⁴ – go further than the senses, than the quick grab and the familiar judgement, by asking yourself *what these things are*, around you, that you scarcely even look at.

Ask yourself what this world is, that it is like this. What each thing in it really is. What the arrangement is. What the plan is – what is such a world saying to you? What does it require you *to say*, and *to do*, and *to be*.

There is no end to the trouble that comes of not asking these things.

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Down this road that we are on – and we are already through the gates of this College, which, in being ideal gates, are (Augustine would have said) more real gates than the stone ones we don't happen to have, you have noticed, on our premises – ... down this road that we are on is a

beauty that we cannot look idly upon. Down this road of seeing is a reality that we are utterly willing to embrace, as we are willing to embrace every beautiful thing.

Whether we know it or not, Augustine said, we are all of us – all of us here today, all of us listening, all of us on this earth – “travel[ling] together the path of love.”⁵

Yet we look on things all around us and do not see them: look at things rejecting, saying No, expressing our taste, registering our disappointment – and failing to find what we would be utterly willing to embrace, because we have not seen at all. We have looked idly.

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So we say, to the students who have come from far and wide to start this year, let us “not look idly on the beauty of the sky, the orderly arrangement of the stars, the brightness of the light, the alternations of days and nights, the monthly courses of the moon, the fourfold divisions of the year, ... the great potency of seeds.” Let us stop measuring these things by our defects and, instead, “take a step” toward *what is*, “toward immortal things, which remain forever” – and, in so doing, “advance toward Him of whom it is said, ‘Seek his face always’.”⁵

Thank you.

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1 *True Religion*; *St. Augustine: On Education* [OE], ed. and trans. George Howie (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969), 218–19.

2 *Soliloquies*, I; OE, 203–04.

3 *The Principle of Order*, ii; OE, 121.

4 *The Principle of Order*, ii; OE, 122.

5 “On the Holy Trinity,” in *Works of St. Augustine for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1994), 1.3.5.