

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION, OR THE RAGE TO LIVE

Commencement Address, Augustine College, September 3, 2006

Isaiah 1

11 To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

12 When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?

13 Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.

14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.

15 And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil;

17 Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

18 Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD.

I

GREETINGS NEW STUDENTS – who will become known, I suspect, as the ‘fabulous four’ – and greetings to their families, to alumni and friends of the College, and to friends. Today is the tenth anniversary of our very first Commencement and I hope you will not be too disappointed if I do my utmost to tell you what this College is really about. That is hard to do and it will take me a few minutes, for reasons that you will see. But I will have a gift for you towards the end.

This ceremony, today, is happening to place ourselves under the guidance of the Lord. But otherwise it is fanfare, and everything to which there is fanfare ought to be *big*. What are we starting here today? Our new students, I am sure, would like to know that: ‘What is the school year that starts today all about, *really*.’ There might be a trace of uncertainty behind that question: ‘Have I made the right decision to come here’ – altogether *reasonable* since that is really *the* great question of human life: ‘What should I do? What should I be doing?’ Easy for us to answer, ‘You should get an education.’ – But *what is that*, really?

You might be surprised at what different answers you can get from educated people. I am going to try to say what I think it is.

What is starting here today is something really extraordinary. I suspect it has already begun to happen here and there in the lives of our new students but we are really going to try to crank up the business for them – and they are entirely ready for it, if not somewhat overdue. If we do our part right what is starting today is an unbelievably breathtaking phase of the journey that these young people struck out on when they opened their eyes and saw their first stunning sight: mother and father. What did you think, when mother’s face first loomed over yours? ...

Who knows. But you *didn't* think a number of things that we often think now when we see a new face. You didn't think, That is a *nice face* or a *peculiar face*. And you didn't think, *Mother!* Strangely, no, you didn't. A poem by Chuang-tzu (3rd C BC), in which Thomas Merton took an interest – it is a poem about “the man in whom Tao acts without impediment” (Tao being the Way, the Way of righteousness, you might say) – that poem has a few lines on this. In Merton's rendering they read,

The man in whom Tao
acts without impediment
... *is not always looking*
For right and wrong
Always deciding 'Yes' and 'No.'

Just like you, on that first day of your life. No judicial pronouncing, no 'Yes' or 'No,' but instead a wide-eyed intake of the face there above you. The name for that attitude, which you had then, is wonder.

But wonder is fragile and almost everything around you has been working since to wean you from your sense of wonder. Even science has turned against wonder, *its* own mother. As a twentieth-century philosopher said, “Man has to awaken to wonder, Science is a way of sending him to sleep again.”¹ Even your teachers and your loving parents, preoccupied with the bundle of stuff they were charged to load you with, have been pushing wonder off. That's how it has to be, unfortunately; that's the price of life in *our* culture at least, with its homework, pass requirements, piano scales, practice meets, and fifty-page instruction manuals. And you've helped out yourself, you and your computer games. (If you don't believe, all you computer gamers, that civilization should become a *technopoly* – if that would be a bad world, where everything is just how-to, means-end effectiveness, *doing* rather than *wonder* – then you should be mad as heck at the industries that have woven enthralling stories around button pushing and conned you into *desiring* more and more direct hits.)

But the lovely thing is that there is a time when you can *forget about* what you need to do. That starts today. You have had 'doing it right' for thirteen, maybe fifteen years already. And there *is* a time when you can *forget about* acquiring skills, because your life is *not about* the application of skills. The world we live in tends to generate a kind of stupor of *making* and *doing* and *getting* when in fact that is only a small part of what we are here for.

You students have seen great things en route to here but you have been too busy with doing and getting, with play and instruction, for very much in the way of wonder. Life has all been so much wandering in the desert till now. I mean that quite seriously – but how could I say such a thing: that's outrageous. Well, the *children*, in the crowd that Moses led through the wilderness, had sights to see – but how long does a child stare with fascination at the passing scene? How long does the farmland or the forest zipping past the car window hold their attention, how long until they bury themselves in amusement? But now we are going up Mount Nebo, we have reached Pisgah from which Moses on his last legs looked out: now we are about to crest a hill and look out over the Promised Land – look at the valley of Jericho, city of palms,

at the silver water pouring down the rocks, at the cool olive groves, the green hills
(Deuteronomy 34).

II

Some of you listening to me have university degrees and I bet you are thinking, ‘That doesn’t sound like any college days I remember.’ And I may have embarrassed some of my colleagues, who are perhaps anxious to say that what *they* do is a whole lot more humble than that. But I am behind the wheel today and I am trying to express what *I* think we are doing here, and I beg you to hear out this major boast. What we are starting here today at Augustine College is radical and revelatory; the vistas of life-changing significance are about to open. *Home* stands ready to be revealed.

Now, I am only digging my pit deeper, I know: only *God* can show us the Promised Land! But *how* does he *do* it, you see – *that* is the question!

We, up here, can’t do it, that is for sure. We faculty are just quivering reeds who often block the view; our lectures will often be dull and our voices tedious – we are just droning bits of gristle, and we look it. And this is not a Bible college; apart from our scripture course all we have to show is Western wisdom. And *does* the Bible tell us that *wisdom* is the key? The philosopher I mentioned, Ludwig Wittgenstein, once wrote:

I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life.) It says that wisdom is all cold; and that you can no more use it for setting your life to rights than you can forge iron when it is *cold*.²

But in fact that helps quite a bit to clarify the place of ideas in the life of a Christian. The *direction* of your life can be changed only by Christ – *faith* – but you must continue to live, and walk forward *in* the right direction, and you can do that only if you can see the Promised Land, if you know where it is – and that is called *understanding*. God gave us minds ... *for* that purpose.

The motto of Augustine College, from St. Augustine via St. Anselm, is

faith seeking understanding | *credo ut intelligam*

When you think of that motto I want you to picture a big pair of scissors: one blade is *faith*, the other is *understanding*. One without the other is important but it does not do our work; the blades must work together or *our* work will not be done: the bonds that bind us to death will not be cut. All Wittgenstein noted was the result of taking one blade away – understanding *without* faith – “useless,” as he said. But faith without understanding is asking God to do our part, the part that is *ours*.

To understand is to see what is, to see how things are, and if you can get the drift of what you will be reading and hearing and seeing at this College then, from those texts and works, calling out to every sense that you have, is a voice that sends chills up your back, because it tells you of *home*.

If you want to know of what great order you are part, then look at the magnificence of all that God has made: consider the staggering order of the physical universe – “the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

If you want to know heaven, the place to which God calls us, you need to hear Bach – *hear*, not listen to.

If you want to know the plight of God’s creatures, shut out of the Garden, you need to see Masaccio – *see*, not look at.

If you want to know ... and I would like to go through all our subjects in this manner because that is how I understand them – but there is not time for that today.

III

Well, let’s get our feet back on the ground. What do other people say a college education is? It is remarkable how many bad answers to that question you can get from universities. Let me read you what faculty at Harvard said in 1978:

Our goal is to encourage a[n] ... informed acquaintance with the major approaches to knowledge, ... so that students have an understanding of what kinds of knowledge exist in certain important areas, how such knowledge is acquired, ... and what it might mean to them personally. We seek, in other words, to have students acquire basic literacy in major forms of intellectual discourse.³

Those are very poor reasons for going to college. What do I care what human beings think is knowledge, only some of which is *true*? Why become literate in a defective practice? Why should I “have an understanding of what kinds of knowledge exist” – why not an understanding of what kinds of shoe exist, or what kinds door-hinge may be found in use in the world today? It’s all just so much human stuff, isn’t it? How does that give us an understanding of where we are? Is *that* not “the wisdom of this world,” which God has “made foolish” (1 Corinthians 1:20)? As another Christian college (Thomas Aquinas in California) so sharply observed:

The view that liberal education begins in wonder and aims at wisdom ... has by and large been replaced by the notion that such an education aims at a kind of cultural enrichment, so that the primary focus of study becomes the works and inventions of man rather than the larger order of which he is a part.⁴

It is the *big* picture that *includes* the works that matters.

So let’s go further back, to the view of education that the Harvard “Core Curriculum” was designed to replace: that was the “Great Books” model developed at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, which still believed in “the pursuit of truth.” Now I think highly of the Great Books approach, but *what is* the most articulate description of what that model of education gives a student according to the man who developed it, Robert Maynard Hutchins? It is to learn

of “man in his relations with other men” and “the science of man and nature” under the guidance of “first principles.” *What* first principles? Consider the presuppositions: “We are a faithless generation and take no stock in revelation,” said Hutchins. “To look to theology to unify the modern university is futile and vain.” And now Hutchins offers an idea that we *can* use, but which seems pretty much the kiss of death for *his* scheme:

If the world has no meaning, [he writes,] if it presents itself to us as a mass of equivalent data, then the pursuit of truth for its own sake consists of the indiscriminate accumulation of data.⁵

It is just a heap of information. What kind of meaning could *Hutchins's* first principles give to the world? I don't know, but *those* principles are simply not *ours*. And principles that are not ours cannot redeem the heap.

So what *is* higher education: why *come here?* What does the word ‘education’ on its own suggest? To me, the word itself sounds like ‘filling’: *O come, empty sausage case, and be filled,* says the university. ‘Well, look, I am not empty’ – I said that at eighteen and I was right. ‘And I am going to *get* filled anyway – the whole world awaits me.’

William Butler Yeats said that “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire” – but does that tell us about learning? What fire? One that will burn down your house?

Or you might hear the word education to say ‘betterment’ – *O come and improve yourself, make yourself better.* Now I knew at eighteen that I needed to be *better* – but if that is the pitch, then ... well, where do we begin? Honestly, there are a thousand things I could imagine doing that would help make me better ahead of signing up for courses. Why should I drop everything and single out *the mind?*

In fact, when you put it that way, your stack of books – your Plato and your Copernicus and your Cicero and Coleridge and pretty pictures and nice music – look a whole lot like a major, year-long distraction from any improvement that really *matters*. Compare that to eight months working with inner-city kids or helping out in AIDS-ravaged Africa or manning the barricades against the marching columns of nothing that are descending on us right here.

I think that the young people who hear *all of those pitches for higher learning* and think, ‘Well who needs that, then,’ are smart people.

The meaning of ‘education’ is not easy to fathom – which is why it has *been forgotten*. In 1936 Hutchins at Chicago wrote,

The question may now be solemnly asked whether ... it would not be better to forget about most of our existing colleges and universities and plan new institutions that would undertake *the overwhelmingly important task that the colleges and universities have given up.*

What is that task, the task of higher education?

Each of the young people here today, and not only them, already *hears a voice*, a profound and moving voice – a voice calling out to you to do something extraordinary. But the voices that call to you from the mainstream universities are actually *calling you away from* doing something extraordinary. They are calling to you, as Thomas Merton put it, with “the despair which dresses itself up as science or philosophy [etc.] and amuses itself with clever answers to clever

questions none of which have anything to do with *the problems of life*.”⁶ They are calling to you to stop here, just as you get to the crest of the hill, and tarry awhile in the maze of academia, the labyrinth of ideas and meanings and culture, and then go forward later with your head re-wired ... *if you ever find your way out*.

What education is about is much *deeper* than ideas and meanings and culture as we understand them. What education is about is so phenomenal that it is wrong even to use the word ‘education’ as a name for it – a word that gets hollower almost every time you hear it. You would need a prophet or a poet to name what it is about.

IV

Ten years ago the founders of Augustine College actually did, amazingly, what Hutchins suggested: they created a “new institution that would undertake the *overwhelmingly important task* that the colleges and universities have given up.” And that great task is to help students awaken from their world-induced slumber – awaken through wonder, truth, and beauty so that with their own intelligence they can rush forward as only a human being can toward the Promised Land – to the voice that is calling you home.

What makes what we are doing so radical is that everything that you can see on our course list is there precisely to amplify the voice calling you to that very place where you *want* to be, where you are *alive*.

I remember very well what it was like to be eighteen: it was a raging hunger *to live*. I knew very well, then, that the ordinary world – the world of the newspaper, the sit-com, management, money – was against me. That world had no clue whatsoever what the rage to live even *was* and it was a world just *dumb enough* to call itself ‘the *real* world.’ Which I *rejected* – that rejection eventually led me to the Church, though the road was a long one. At eighteen I holed up with ‘my books and my music,’ as my mother put it, because there I heard the voice of life. And so I was lured to the university, where the marching columns of nothing *got me* for quite a few years. I remember very well what it was like to be eighteen and it has taken me awhile to get out of the desert and over the crest to the verge of the Promised Land where I can *live*.

What you need to get to is exactly that place where every day of your life can be spent doing something extraordinary – where every day you are *alive*. And you are going to get precious little help with that from Canadian or American culture. The place you are going to is *not even on* any road map that you can buy from the university or the guidance counsellor or the motivational guru or qualified expert.

But there is something that I have not mentioned – as if you were all just a bunch of heathens: church. You *have* heard about the Promised Land at church; you *get* a map from your minister or priest, if you are going to the right church, because at a church that *is* a church you are getting the Bible. But can you read it? To some extent, of course, certainly. But aren’t we reading it with half-open, uneducated eyes? Shouldn’t we put more *mind* into it? Isn’t that what the greatest Commandment in the Bible says: to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and

with all thy soul, and *with all thy mind*" (Mark 12:30)? – a phrase that I am delighted to hear almost every Sunday at my church.

If the map were *readable* – if the message could get right through just because of its author – then why is the world in the mess that it is in? Has the Bible not been *read*? Didn't the Hebrews have the tablets in God's own handwriting? Didn't they have Moses straight down off the mountain, *direct* from a forty-day head-to-head? They did, and what it all led to was Isaiah chapter 1.

And you may say, 'Why sure, but you are talking about the *Old Testament*; *we* have the *New Covenant* – Jesus came to do what the law could not.' But can we not do with *Jesus* what the Israelites did with *the law*: "hear indeed but *understand not*" (Isaiah 6:9)? And if not, then why did the Christian West wind up producing a culture that is like a vast chorus calling us away from home and drowning out the voice calling exactly to *us*?

We need the *mind* to do God's bidding. – Yet you may object that it is all much clearer than that. *In* Isaiah chapter 1, you might say, we *have* a road map, which when we fold it out becomes the New Testament, and it is all self-explanatory. How to do something extraordinary is spelled right out for us. But until we have understanding, all those apparently self-explaining injunctions ("relieve the oppressed, ... plead for the widow") are completely wasted on us. Who, after all, *is* oppressed and what does the widow *need*? Here, I have to say, the text is on my side; let me read it:

"learn to do well; seek judgment."

The Lord's message here is, don't come to me fresh from your evil ways and give me your goats, your bullocks, even your kindness to the widow: "*cease to do evil.*" And the reply of the fallen human being, *surely*, has to be, "*How, Lord! How do I do it!*" Pay attention to the words, from God, that Isaiah reports:

"learn to do well; seek judgment."

You have work to do, and it is work of *learning* and *seeking*. And to *get to it* you must get *away from*, at least for a time, all this business of setting yourself up in life. Because *this* is only a *part* of your life; *your* life is *eternal*.

If we simply answer, 'Yes, Lord, I will put away evil,' then we will fail. We need to understand that. That *is* the Bible, isn't it? Does the Bible not recount, from its first book to its last, the *failure* of the people of God? Is that not one of God's most unrelenting messages *to* his people? We need to understand what the Israelites again and again did not understand, not simply because they did not listen to God – I believe that many did and failed nonetheless – but because they did not listen with *understanding*. They listened too simplistically.

The person who simply *chooses to do right*, or who heads off toward the Promised Land by his own reading of the map, becomes lost in the desert. Not because he tries to do it all himself and leaves nothing to grace – *that* is certainly a mistake – but because he leaves everything to God, he leaves it *all* to grace, because he does not do *his* part. What was the mistake? The ancient world explained it: "Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law" (Psalm 119:34).

The wisdom is *there, in* the Bible, but it is hard to learn – we are talking about “a subject of great difficulty,” Augustine said.⁷ We will need an entire culture to teach it and, because we do not have it, our lesson awaits us in the past. The wisdom of the ancient world tells us all about the task of education that the world has long rejected, and has *always* rejected.

V

I *could* stop here; I have said enough, really. But what about your *gift*? ... If you wanted, I could *tell you* what that wisdom was. I could give it to you right now, in ten statements ... give you the gist of the ancient wisdom that *tells us* why education is needed – *why* we fail to meet God half way, fail to receive grace though we say we want it, fail to make progress as Christians – *even as people*. Even those who are not Christians cannot get on with the lives that they have chosen for lack of this same wisdom.

For all of the basic wisdom of the ancient world, perhaps a few more minutes are worth it – and this will make the price of admission a real bargain.

So here it is: we cannot make progress, we cannot fulfil ourselves, if we do not understand these ten things. And what I am about to deliver is, first, *five* propositions *about us*, about who we are. (“Know thyself,” said the inscription on the ancient temple at Delphi.) Well, you may not like it, but this is what the ancient world said we are:

We are sick; we are blind; we are weak; we are not ourselves; and we are fools.

(Do you think that about yourself? Does anybody? – *Education!* – Can you *imagine* these propositions being taught at the spanking clean universities with their bright-eyed technology?)

What *did* the Hebrews and the Greeks and the Christian Fathers who built upon them and the medieval thinkers who brought those sources even closer together *mean by that*? Let’s go through the five again, quickly.

Proposition 1: YOU ARE SICK

“God saw that the wickedness of man was great ... and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). The grinding repetitiousness of the Old Testament narrative – the Israelites are rescued from bondage, and then, waiting for Moses to bring down God’s word, they dance around the Golden Calf, are fiercely punished, repent, and then put up idols of Baal and Ashtoreth, are delivered unto their enemies, then beg for forgiveness, are rescued, build God a Temple, and then wheel in the idols – the *tediousness* of that story bears the message that the human being is ... – and *what* word can we use here? The *only* word that fits is ‘sick.’ The people who in our society get *high* at home, then at work, then lose their jobs, their savings, their families, then hit bottom and get professional help ... and then get jail time for robberies committed to feed their habit – we call such people ‘sick.’ There is no other explanation for that kind of behaviour; it is beyond bad judgement.

What does ‘sickness’ mean? *We* understand ‘sickness’ to mean dysfunction of the body. Did we invent the concept of ‘sickness’? Hardly; it is as old as man. What is *modern* is the total restriction of the concept to our bodies: *only bodies today are sick*. (We eventually extended that

notion to the mind in the concept of mental illness but as we have gradually taught ourselves that mental illness is really brain disease, chemical trouble, we are back to the dysfunction of the body – that is all the sickness that modern people can handle.) But the ancient world said, You are a body *and* a mind, and *both* may be sick. “Your life, no less than your body, may suffer disease,”⁸ said Democritus. “The destruction of the *understanding*,” said Marcus Aurelius, “is a pestilence much more indeed than any such corruption and change ... which surrounds us.”⁹ *More destructive*, he is saying, than a hurricane. And that is the first proposal – but if *this* is true then there are staggering consequences.

Proposition 2: YOU ARE BLIND

Your sickness of spirit means that *you cannot see*. “The sun is shown to your *eyes*,” said Augustine, but your mind has no illumination¹⁰: it is all darkness thanks to the cataracts cleaving to your spiritual eyes and dimming down the light. Your mental vision, your mind, your *logos* – a Greek word that means not just your ability to put two thoughts together (and of course that too is in trouble) but also your comprehension, your ideas, your imagination itself: these are *all disturbed* by your sickness.

What does that mean? It means, don’t count on getting where you are heading because you don’t even see where you are. *You* think that to accomplish something – to put your evil doings away, to get a law degree, to become selfless and help other people – all that is needed is for you to set your goal and then make your move. But you are not on a static plain; you are in the river of life; your move is *nothing* against the forces that are ranged against you – oh yes, you can’t see them, you can’t see them pouring out of yourself and driving you backwards, because you are blind.

If you cannot see where you are then you cannot go safely forward: “I seek the truth by which no man was ever injured,” says Marcus Aurelius, “But he is injured who abides in his error and ignorance.”¹¹

Proposition 3: YOU ARE WEAK

Unfortunately you are not *just* blind; you are *weak*. Weak *how*? Well, you do not see where you are, but what if a wiser person were to explain where you were? (Moses or Samuel or Isaiah to the Israelites.) Wasted effort. Your mind is too weak for the medicine, which races right through you and does nothing. “The mind cannot see,” said Augustine, “*unless it is healthy*.” – Think about that. “The mind cannot see unless it is healthy; therefore, God cannot be shown to a stained and sick mind,” is what Augustine said.¹² (“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” – 1 Corinthians 1:18.) *The evidence* cannot be received by the mind that is too weak for it just as *the medicine* cannot be received by the body that is too weak for *it*. Both mind and body have to be strengthened for the real cure even to start.

Unless you prepare your mind, by eliminating the sickness – by actually ridding yourself of some of the germs and poisons romping through your system (and Augustine says the mind is fed from the body, too: “The soul’s eyes consist of a mind free from every taint of the body, turned away and purified from all desire for temporal things”)¹³ – unless your mind is *well*,

knows the meaning of 'temporal things,' *has* such a category, you remain completely unreachable by the great medicine of wisdom. Unless your *life* changes, your vision *cannot*.

Proposition 4: YOU ARE NOT YOURSELF

What all of this means is that you are not yourself, just as you are not yourself when you are laid flat by fever, as mobile as a zucchini in the sun. But because the trouble is in your spirit, your mind, you do not see yourself mentally 'laid flat' – your mind is not a body – and so you think you are fine. *You* think that you *are* yourself; you look in the mirror and you think you see *you*. But that isn't you, said the ancients: that worried face staring back at you? – that is the look of a person afflicted by things that have nothing to do with them. (Temporal things?)

What you are seeing there, in the mirror, is – to shift metaphors to Isaiah 5 – wild grapes: dry, tiny, struggling things, not the fruit of those choice vines that were planted in a lovingly tended vineyard. That is *not* you because, thanks to your sickness, you have refused the water poured on you: you have not done what it takes to *become yourself*. "*Become what you are!*" wrote the Greek poet Pindar in the 5th century BC.¹⁴

Unfortunately, there is a lot going on in you that is working *against* 'you being you.' So the time to think about what to do with your life hasn't really come yet, has it? The right answer to the question, 'What should I do?' is surely 'The thing that is suited to me, the person I *am*' – and you don't really know who you are, because you are not yourself. You are sick; you are blind.

And finally proposition 5: YOU ARE A FOOL

What can a person who – in their thinking and in their life – is sick, blind, weak, and not themselves *do about* that problem? Maybe they should *diagnose* themselves. Maybe they should *work out a suitable cure*. – No? You don't think so? – Of course not!

What would be the sense of it if the patient cannot see the symptoms? As Plato said, "The tiresome thing about ignorance is precisely this, that ... no one who does not believe that he lacks a thing *desires* what he does not believe that he *lacks*!"¹⁵ ... You only seek a cure when you believe that you are sick.

What would be the sense of self-help if that person *categorically denies* the causal connectedness on which the whole business of cure depends? If you *reject the connection* between health – habits of mental consumption, say, concerning what goes *into* your mind – and your ability to understand, then you have *no cause to stop* taking in the germs or the chemicals that are destroying your vision. "When the mind does not believe that health is the precondition of seeing," Augustine tells us, "it *pays no heed to its own health*."¹⁶

And that means that the patient is *against his cure*. Now what does a doctor call a patient like that: a patient who flatly refuses the best advice for restoring his vision, who rejects etiology, who *cannot receive* the physician's help? "Cursing the medicine offered to them," said Augustine, "they run for refuge into their own darkness, which is the only state their diseased condition can endure."¹⁷ These are patients who *embrace* their disease and a patient like that is a *fool*. And that is the fifth proposition about who we are.

VI

Let me wrap this up. The wisdom that we need to acquire tells us why we are frustrated, backsliders, miserable – as the ancient world put it: *unhappy*. We are unhappy because we *are* this way – sick, blind, weak, not ourselves, and foolish. We *behave* ridiculously (saying one thing, doing another, regretting it, promising to reform, and then starting the cycle all over again, even to the point of losing everything). That ridiculous behaviour is *sick* behaviour and we perpetuate it *because of* an illness that makes it impossible for us even to understand what it is that we are being told when we are told to put away sin. We read *even the Bible* like a *blind person*.

And if this is the case there is an obvious implication. That series of statements about *what we are* implies another series of statements – a second volley of wisdom – about *what we need*. If we *are x* then we *need y*.

If we are sick, then we need to be cured.

If we are blind, then we need to recover our sight.

If we are weak, then we need to rebuild our strength.

If we are not ourselves, then we need to become ourselves.

If we are fools, then we need to submit – *not* decide for ourselves.

And what that spells out, and for the very first time, is *education*. There it is! That's what it is! That's the whole story!

Apart from this ancient wisdom about the nature of man, man's fallen condition, the concept of education is meaningless – just an arbitrary dogma, an *umbrella* for anything the corporate powers of this year's academy wish to get under it. Without *this*, education is entirely cut adrift from its meaning. The plight of humankind sketched in that ancient outlook on human life *is what calls education forth*, which apart from that is nothing but a specially florid symptom.

Do you want an education from a place that, like most every university I know, rejects not only *that* vision of the human being but refuses to say *anything, as* an institution, *about the condition of human life* – refuses the *very idea* of a *condition* of human life, a *truth* about human life? The purpose of *knowing* is not what the universities say it is – to be literate, enriched, familiar with knowledge, mentally developed. It is *to exist, to thrive, to live here on the earth as what we are*. How can we even *live*, without understanding?

I began by asking *what education is*. Now we know. It is the answer – the *human* part of the answer, the bottom blade of the scissors – to man's sickness. "What concerns the body," said Augustine, "is called medicine; what concerns the soul is called education," and "education ... serves to restore mental health."¹⁸ We need our health to do God's will, to be what he bids us become. And it is time, as Marcus Aurelius said: "A limit of time is fixed for you, which if you do not use it for clearing away the clouds from your mind, it will go and you will go, and it never will return."¹⁹ What and where *are we*, without understanding? "He who does not know what the world is," wrote Marcus Aurelius, "does not know *where he is*. And he who does not know for what purpose the world exists, does not know *who he is*, nor *what the world is*."²⁰

Knowing about the world is the unfolding, from God's gift of the world, of all of the implications that descend from that great starting point. Education is an *extraordinary* thing!

In closing let me sum this up. Here are the five problems and the five cures that we must undertake through the use of our minds.

1 | You are sick and so YOU NEED TO BE CURED

This is, in our history, the fork in our road. What we do not sufficiently realize is that we, today, are living in a world that has been entirely built upon the *rejection* of that premise. Outside that door you see a world that has said, 'You are *fabulous*, and you deserve *this!*' (insert glossy photo here). Universities and governments – even churches – have been built around the fundamental dogma that we are not sick but *well*. – On that score Marcus Aurelius could save us a lot of wasted energy: “As it is a shame to be surprised if the fig-tree produces figs, so it is to be surprised if the world produces such and such things of which it is productive.”²¹ The world gives according to its pitiable state, so let us get on with *our* business.

2 | You are blind and so YOU NEED TO RESTORE YOUR VISION

Too little light enters the mind but that can be changed if our mental intake is purified (if it is not just 'this and that' that we study), and if we give time to “clearing away the clouds from our mind” (if we are willing to distinguish *cloud* [bad] from *light* [good] and therefore seek out intellectual *failings* and face our mental *cowardice*), and if we learn what 'thinking' is (not just scattered exercise but purposeful labour with the real questions: what is life, health? how does science actually *work*? what is friendship? what is good?).

3 | You are weak, but you cannot be made strong *today* – you cannot be cured *today*; today YOU MUST START YOUR TREATMENT

“It does not follow that everyone who looks sees,” says Augustine; “therefore, ... looking which leads to vision,”²² must be gradually acquired. The road to wisdom is a glass of water here and some meaty food there and some mental aerobics and some intellectual sunlight until, one day, by the grace of God, hearing becomes understanding.

4 | You are not yourself and so YOU NEED TO *BECOME* WHAT YOU ARE

But what are you? Time for you to think about that. Marcus Aurelius says,

Do you not see the little plants, the little birds, the ants, the spiders, the bees working together to put order in several parts of the universe? And are you unwilling to do the work of a human being, ... will you not make haste to do that which is according to your nature?²³

But *what is* according to your nature? Is it not your nature *to think* – the ancient world called that the *divine* part of your make-up.²⁴ Can you *succeed* at life, at being what you are, if you do not know what it means to be made *in the image of God*? (God is not a body, after all.)

5 | You are a fool, YOU NEED TO SUBMIT

We are children and therefore we need to *submit* – *not* decide for ourselves. We cannot take the lead in helping ourselves. What we need to do is to submit, and education is a *process* of *submission*.

Submit to what we see, in science and art. *Submit to the text*, in scripture and philosophy and literature. *Submit to what we hear*, in music. But with the aim of submitting to ‘what is there’ beyond our fevered perception. We are not very good at seeing what exists in the world God gave to us, not too good at *seeing the glory* – but we can be helped: there are those who can *help us* to calm the tumult inside us and let the things before our eyes *be what they are*.

When I first read those lines translated by Merton I did not *understand* them. Shouldn’t a Christian *always* be *deciding right and wrong, saying Yes or No?* Well, maybe – *if he is well*. But the righteous man is not so sure that his Yes and No are *God’s*; the fact that he has faith is *not guarantee enough*. We can become ourselves and do God’s bidding only by *understanding* and we can come to understanding only by being children, by letting ourselves be led: led by teachers and led by the things that our teachers have *become* teachers by *submission to*.

*

“Learn to do well,” said the Lord: and it will *take* learning.

“*Seek judgment*”: because you cannot get it today – today it is finally time to prepare for your cure, *too soon* to decide what to do with your life.

We usually think of education as if it were something of *use to us*, and there is a certain sense to that. But if I have said anything meaningful about this difficult subject it will perhaps be clear that that is, typically, the backwards vision of the fevered mind. Really, in reality, the purpose of education is to make *us* useful to God.

Edward Tingley | Dean, Augustine College, Ottawa

NOTES

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5e.

2 Wittgenstein, 53e.

3 “Report on the Core Curriculum” circulated to members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard; cited by Marjorie Garber, “General Education,” online at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/curriculum-review/essays_pdf/Marjorie_Garber.pdf#search=%22Harvard%20%22general%20education%22%20Garber%22.

4 Thomas E. Dillon, “Introduction” (1993), *A Proposal for the Fulfillment of Catholic Liberal Education* (Santa Paula: Thomas Aquinas College, n.d.), 1–2.

5 Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (1936; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), ch. 4.

6 Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1955), xii.

7 Augustine, *The Practices of the Catholic Church*, 55, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, ed. and trans. George Howie (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969), 98.

8 *Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Penguin 1987), 283.

9 Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, book 9,2; trans. George Long, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. R.M. Hutchins, vol. 12 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 291.

10 “Reason ... promises to display God to your mind.” Augustine, *Soliloquies*, I, 12, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 202.

11 Marcus Aurelius, book 6, 21; in Long edition, 276.

12 Augustine, *Soliloquies* I, 12, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 203.

13 Augustine, *Soliloquies*, I, 12, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 203.

14 Pindar, “Pythian Ode II,” line 72; *The Works of Pindar*, ed. Lewis Richard Farnell (London: Macmillan, 1932), vol. 3, 7.

15 Plato, *Symposium*, 204a.

16 Augustine, *Soliloquies* I, 12, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 203.

17 Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul*, 70–76, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 217.

18 Augustine, *The Practices of the Catholic Church*, 52, 55; in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 98.

19 Marcus Aurelius, book 2, 4; in Long edition, 257, translation modernized.

20 Marcus Aurelius, book 8, 52; in Long edition, 290.

21 Marcus Aurelius, book 7, 14–15; in Long edition, 286.

22 “Virtue is simply straight and perfect reason.” Augustine, *Soliloquies*, I, 12, in *St. Augustine: On Education*, 204.

23 Marcus Aurelius, book 5, 1; in Long edition, 268, translation modernized.

24 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 10, ch. 7.