

BOOK

On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

"This book shows how Augustine can be a pilgrim guide to a spirituality that meets the complicated world we live in. Augustine, says Smith, is the patron saint of restless hearts--a guide who has been there, asked our questions, and knows our frustrations and failed pursuits. Augustine spent a lifetime searching for his heart's true home and he can help us find our way. "What makes Augustine a guide worth considering," says Smith, "is that he knows where home is, where rest can be found, what peace feels like, even if it is sometimes ephemeral and elusive along the way." Addressing believers and skeptics alike, this book shows how Augustine's timeless wisdom speaks to the worries and struggles of contemporary life, covering topics such as ambition, sex, friendship, freedom, parenthood, and death."

"Augustine will unapologetically suggest that you were made for God – that home is found beyond yourself, that Jesus is the way, that the cross is a raft in the storm-tossed sea we call "the world."

"The Christian gospel, for Augustine, wasn't just the answer to an intellectual question (though it was that); it was more like a shelter in a storm, a port for a wayward soul, nourishment for a prodigal who was famished, whose own heart had become, he said, "a famished land."

"Augustine doesn't write from the sky; he writes from the road. He knows ditches, and as he'll confess in book 10 of the Confessions, not even a bishop can avoid them. We are still on the way."

"This is why book 10 of Augustine's Confessions is such a gift: it is the testimony of a broken bishop in the present. You realize Augustine isn't just narrating past temptations he has escaped; he's confessing all the ways he's still tempted to camp out in alcoves of creation as if they were home."

"As French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion points out, conversion doesn't solve temptation; rather, it heightens temptation, because conversion creates resistance."

"This struck me once when we were staying in Santa Monica, California – the city named for Augustine's mother. Thousands of miles and a world away from Hippo, in a city whose coast and light would have felt familiar to Augustine, his mother is mostly unknown to those who now envision "Santa Monica" – its palm trees and promenade, its glistening beaches and glittering stars. Santa Monica almost looks like an

Augustinian monastery in negative. And yet his mother, praying over the son of her tears, covers the city.”

“The sanctuary was animated by a healthy, vibrant congregation, notably diverse and affirming, with a clear sense of belonging, of family. Indeed, I was struck by the gay couple in front of us: in secularized California, in liberal Santa Monica, they don’t “need” to be here. There’s no social capital to be gained, and perhaps not a little to be lost. And yet here they are: hungry, open, welcomed, worshipping.”

“You’ll find this perplexing concoction of sacred and profane in the Confessions too. And this world isn’t so unlike the world reflected in Augustine’s sermons and letters, counseling the corpus permixtum, the mixed-up body of Christ who are supposed to be in the world but instead seem very much of it. Augustine doesn’t just help us understand saints; he will help us make sense of La-La Land.”

“We cultivate indifference as a cocoon. We make irony a habit because the safety of maintaining a knowing distance works as a defense. If you can’t find what matters, conclude that nothing matters. If the hunger for home is always and only frustrated, decide “the road is life.”

“There is more than one way to be on the road. There is, of course, a vulnerability to this experience—an exposure, what Zweig describes as a kind of dependence that he resents, a sense that his existence is a favor granted by others, that even the air he breathes is something for which he is obligated to give thanks.”

“Augustine frames this search as a quest, a pilgrimage to the country called joy, where we find peace and rest because we find ourselves in the God who welcomes us home. Like the exhausted refugee, fatigued by vulnerability, what we crave is rest. “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

“The soul’s hunger for peace is a longing for a kind of rest from anxiety and frantic pursuits—it is to rest in God. And for Augustine, to find this rest—to entrust ourselves to the one who holds us—is to find joy. “In your gift we find our rest,” Augustine concludes. “There are you our joy. Our rest is our peace.”

“Under the stunning Duomo in Milan is an archaeological area where visitors can see the remains of the baptismal font where Ambrose baptized Augustine during the Easter Vigil of 387. The octagonal shape of the large pool speaks to the hope of “eighth-day” renewal—the hope that catechumens, upon arising from the watery “grave,” would be a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).”

“The city of God as tent city, as refugee camp, speaks to the vulnerability and risk of the life of faith, bringing out an essential aspect of Augustine’s understanding of our journey.”

“Zweig backhandedly highlights what Augustine sees as a feature of the migrant city of God: it is well aware of its dependence. If these tent cities remind us of the tenuousness of the migrant family that is the body of Christ, they also remind us that the migrant soul is one that is aware of its dependence and is animated by hope.”

“The migrant soul, a stranger in the earthly city, citizen of the heavenly city, lives lightly. Not being at home anywhere, looking for the home that is the refuge of the city of God, the Christian can also, with a kind of sanctified indifference, manage to pitch her tent anywhere. This indifference is not quietist or escapist.”

“Augustine is the perfect guy for the road because he’s been on it and is sympathetic to all our angst on the way. There’s almost nothing you’re going to tell him that he hasn’t already heard.”

“This is not unlike what Augustine thought freedom was when he first made his way to Carthage and later to Rome. What he hadn’t anticipated, and what he tried to ignore even as he was experiencing it, was the exhaustion of it all. What he envisioned as freedom – the removal of constraints – started to feel like a punishment. The obliteration of boundaries looked like liberation to the young Augustine; but he could feel himself dissolving in the resulting amorphousness.”

“In his Carthage revel, Augustine made his way “to the shackles of gratification, and was gleefully trussed up in those afflicting bonds.” This dynamic of freedom lost – especially a lost freedom experienced as if it were liberation – would occupy Augustine for the rest of his life. Indeed, when he recalls the cataclysm of his conversion, the revolution of love that grace brought about, it comes down to a question of freedom because he had ultimately come to see himself in chains.”

“To read Augustine in the twenty-first century is to gain a vantage point that makes all of our freedom look like addiction. When we imagine freedom only as negative freedom¹⁵ – freedom from constraint, hands-off liberty to choose what I want – then our so-called freedom is actually inclined to captivity. When freedom is mere voluntariness, without further orientation or goals, then my choice is just another means by which I’m trying to look for satisfaction.”

“Grace is the answer to the call for help. Grace isn’t just forgiveness, a covering, an acquittal; it is an infusion, a transplant, a resurrection, a revolution of the will and wants. It’s the hand of a Higher Power that made you and loves you reaching into your soul with the gift of a new will. Grace is freedom.”

“The paradox (or irony) – especially to those of us conditioned by the myth of autonomy, who can imagine freedom only as freedom from – is that this gracious infusion of freedom comes wrapped in the gift of constraint, the gift of the law, a command that calls us into being.”

“Augustine deconstructs our false dichotomies between grace and obedience, freedom and constraint, because he has a radically different conception of freedom that we’ve forgotten in modernity: freedom not as permission but as power, the freedom of graced empowerment, freedom for.”

“If Augustine spent half his life battling the heresy of Pelagianism – the pretension that the human will was sufficient to choose its good – it’s because he saw it as the great lie that left people enchained to their dissolute wills. And no one is more Pelagian than we moderns.”

“The Christian life is a pilgrimage of hope. We live between the first and the final freedom; we are still on the way. Grateful for the second grace, we await the final.³⁸ And we are emboldened in our waiting on the way by the example of the martyrs. They give us hope that we might find the power to choose well.”

“If you keep walking around the phenomenon of ambition, you’ll start to note a couple of features. First, the opposite of ambition is not humility; it is sloth, passivity, timidity, and complacency.”

“We sometimes like to comfort ourselves by imagining that the ambitious are prideful and arrogant so that those of us who never risk, never aspire, never launch out into the deep get to wear the moralizing mantle of humility. But this imagining is often just thin cover for a lack of courage, even laziness.”

“For Augustine, the only way to get to the root of this desire is to understand it as a spiritual craving. That’s why we can only truly understand disordered ambition if we read it as a kind of idolatry. If our ambition becomes a roadblock to peace, an inhibitor that robs us of the rest and joy we’re looking for, it’s because we’ve substituted something in place of the end for which we were made.”

“What is our aim in life? What are we aiming for when we aim our lives at some aspiration? The question isn’t whether we aim our lives. Our existence is like an arrow on a taut string: it will be sent somewhere. It’s not a matter of quelling ambition, of “settling,” as if that were somehow more virtuous (or even possible). The alternative to disordered ambition that ultimately disappoints is not some holy lethargy or pious passivity. It’s recalibrated ambition that aspires for a different end and does so for different reasons.”

“Our culture of ambition has only two speeds: either win or quit. But perhaps our ambition to win is a hunger to be noticed – maybe even a lifelong, unarticulated hunger to be noticed by a father, to hear him say, “Well done. You did it.”

“But that’s not why he loves you. You don’t have to win, but you also don’t have to quit. You only have to quit performing, quit imagining his love is earned. You can rest, but you don’t have to quit. You just need to change why you play.”

“A later Augustinian, Blaise Pascal, named this with the same sort of self-knowledge: “Vanity is so anchored in the human heart,” he observed, “that a soldier, a cadet, a cook, a kitchen porter boasts, and wants to have admirers, and even philosophers want them, and those who write against them want the prestige of having written well, and those who read them want the prestige of having read them, and I, writing this, perhaps have this desire, and those who will read this . . .”

“Resting in the love of God doesn’t squelch ambition; it fuels it with a different fire. I don’t have to strive to get God to love me; rather, because God loves me unconditionally, I’m free to take risks and launch out into the deep. I’m released to aspire to use my gifts in gratitude, caught up in God’s mission for the sake of the world. When you’ve been found, you’re free to fail.”