

I'm a philosopher. We can't think our way out of this mess.

## **I'm throwing in my lot with the poets and painters, the novelists and songwriters.**

by [James K. A. Smith](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



(Illustration by Tim Cook)

*During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the eighth in the new series.*

The path to philosophy is paved with polemic and fueled by brash confidence in the power of logic. When I answered the call to be a philosophical theologian 25 years ago, I imagined the world's (and the church's) problems amounted to a failure of analysis. If only we could *think* more carefully, the truth would come out. Good arguments would save us.

And yet here I am, in the middle of this profession, in the middle of a career as a philosopher, with second thoughts. I've had a change of heart about how to change someone's mind.

This change is bound up with my biography. As a convert to the Christian faith at age 18, I immediately sensed a call to what I could only describe as "the ministry." In retrospect, what that meant was informing people of the Truth. It's as if I felt Christianity was a secret that had been kept from me, so my ardor was to let others in on the secret. Ancient Mariner-like, I would buttonhole people to make the case.

This started on street corners with a friend. He would strum his guitar on the sidewalk and sing songs by Bob Dylan or Simon and Garfunkel to draw a crowd. I would then utilize what we called a "sketch board" that looked a bit like a *Jeopardy!* board: blank squares waiting to become words. With a few strategic dashes of a paintbrush, I would unveil a secret message about sin and salvation. We were decoding the truth. I'm not sure we convinced a soul. This seems like a lifetime ago. It almost feels like someone else's life.

Converted through the Plymouth Brethren, a low-church sect of evangelicalism suspicious of ordained ministry, I preached my first sermon at 19. This snowballed into a kind of 20th-century circuit rider ministry in tiny churches dotting villages in southwestern Ontario—Gorrie and Alma, Wingham and Wallenstein, Tavistock and Exeter. I would drive to town on a Sunday morning, preach a first service, spend an afternoon in a family's home, nourished by a meal and a nap, return to the chapel for the evening service, and then drive home. I did this alongside my undergraduate and early graduate studies, shuttling between the worlds of the university and the fundamentalist chapel.

As I imagined a call to pastoral ministry, all I really imagined was preaching. And the only thing I could envision as preaching was teaching: didactic induction into the truth. The pulpit was where one dispensed instruction. I look at my sermon notes from this period and cringe. I want to go back to these congregations and

apologize—for boring them to death, sure, but also for a youthful selfishness, imagining my abstractions and speculations had anything to do with living the Christian life. Here were people quietly burying their elders, terrified for children bent on destroying themselves, facing death and loneliness and loss, never given permission to doubt, carrying any number of secret burdens and sins they longed to confess; and here's a 22-year-old kid who's read a lot of books trying to parse trinitarian personhood through 19th-century scholasticism as if it matters.

It was during this period that I started to get an inkling that my calling might take a different tack—into not the seas of pastoral ministry but the more staid waters of academia. When I read Alvin Plantinga's inaugural address at Notre Dame, "Advice to Christian Philosophers" (published in the first volume of the Society of Christian Philosophers' journal, *Faith and Philosophy*), I felt like Augustine did when he read Cicero's *Hortensius*: it "changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different values and priorities" (*Confessions* 3.4.7). What better way to pursue the truth than this discipline that was (supposedly) animated by the love of wisdom? Having applied both to seminary and for graduate study in philosophy, I sensed that God wanted me to study philosophy to bring its analytical gifts to theology and the church.

Nothing beats the love of wisdom out of you like a graduate program in philosophy. It is an apprenticeship in polemics. Philosophy begins in wonder, Plato tells us. But a doctorate in philosophy is where wonder goes to die. What begins as a quest for wisdom ends as a search for a job. And a job is the reward for repressing wonder and pursuing mastery. The goal of graduate study in philosophy is to carve out a niche of debate like a territory to be conquered—and to be the last one standing in a field littered with the vanquished arguments and the misbegotten fallacies of your opponents. Pair this formation with the ardor of the apologist and you get a carefully honed polemical sword wielded with the confidence of having the Truth on one's side. Stand back: I'm here to teach.

As a young Christian philosopher, I wanted to be the confident, heresy-hunting Augustine, vanquishing the pagans with brilliance, fending off the Manichaeans and Pelagians with ironclad arguments. As a middle-aged man, I dream of being Mr. Rogers. When you're young, it's easy to confuse strength with dominance; when you're older, you realize the feat of character it takes to be meek. I used to imagine my calling was to defend the Truth. Now I'm just trying to figure out how to love.

It's not that I've given up on truth. It's just that I'm less confident we'll think our way out of the morass and malaise in which we find ourselves. Analysis won't save us. And the truth of the gospel is less a message to be taught than a mystery enacted. Love won't save us either, of course. But I've come to believe that the grace of God that *will* save us is more powerfully manifest in beloved community than in rational enlightenment. Or, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has put it, "Love alone is credible; nothing else can be believed, and nothing else ought to be believed."

What changed my mind?

In some ways, it was a philosophical appreciation for the limits of philosophy—a rational conclusion about the limits of reason. A decade ago I read Marcel Proust's early critical work *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and was jarred by the opening line of his prologue: "Every day I set less store on the intellect." This is the sort of thing that makes philosophers nervous, the charge of "irrationalism!" on a hair trigger. But as I listened to Proust consider the failures of the intellect to evoke the past or probe the depth of emotion, an insight was rumbling to the surface. Proust's poetic prose was doing something propositions could never do. "Compared with this past," he concluded, "this private essence of ourselves, the truths of intellect seem scarcely real at all."

While Proust never intended it, a theological insight was welling up in my imagination: that the "truths of intellect" were inadequate to the fullness of grace experienced in friendship with Christ and his body. While Proust's focus was artistic, I was sensing important parallels with theology and the importance of recognizing what Proust called "the relative inferiority of the intellect." And yet, he emphasized, there is a paradox at work here, since "it is the intellect we must call on to establish this inferiority. Because if intellect does not deserve the crown of crowns, only intellect is able to award it." I found myself nodding in agreement with Proust and worried that I was becoming a traitor to my discipline.

However, I have just enough Augustinian self-suspicion to suspect I'm fronting this philosophical reason for my change of mind when, in fact, there are more personal, more existential factors that led me to see the limits of logic and finally understand the irreducible intelligence of love. Perhaps naming it is just the sort of philosophical risk that performs the point I'm trying to make.

The other catalyst was a season of dark depression. None of my analytical skills helped me claw my way out of the lonely trench in which I found myself, alienated from those right next to me. I won't adequately capture the despair of realizing that my intellectual strengths were powerless to dispel the black sun that oppressed me. It was a profound experience of puzzlement and bewilderment: *What's happening to me?* I wondered. Nothing in my external circumstances should engender sadness or disappointment. To the contrary. *But why am I sobbing in the middle of the afternoon? Why am I either a monster of anger or a lethargic shell? Why do my wife and children feel a million miles away, and why do I keep pushing them even farther?* I didn't understand, and that in itself was an affront to my philosophical confidence.

This experience was humbling on a number of registers, including intellectually, because I confronted a challenge that refused to be solved by analysis. All of my vocational confidence in the power of reason was quite literally humiliated in the face of depression. I couldn't think my way out of this.

Instead, a hand reached down into that dark pit. It was the hand of a Christian counselor, and he didn't just reach down into the pit; he jumped down there beside me. I can't help but recall here a scene from *The West Wing*. White House chief of staff Leo McGarry reaches out to his deputy, Josh Lyman, who is struggling with PTSD. Leo tells him a parable:

This guy's walking down the street when he falls down a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, "Hey, you! Can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription and throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts, "Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey, Joe, it's me! Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."

My therapist helped me find the way out. But it took a while. I think that's because I brought my philosophical prejudices to our first meetings, expecting he'd give me the information I needed to figure out my problem.

Eventually, through his patience and compassion, through a remarkable ability to be *with* me in a way that embodied grace, I realized what we were doing: he wasn't going to teach me or instruct me. Our conversation wasn't a way to exchange ideas. It was an exercise in re-narration. If I was going to be restored to health, it was because my imagination was "restored." My depression brought me to the limits of my intellect; the healing that came with therapy required the same displacement of the intellect that Proust had been talking about. I didn't need to refine my knowledge. I needed to carry a different story in my bones.

Clichéd as it might be, my story hinged on the trauma of being abandoned by a father and then a stepfather, a line of fathers who left. And while I believed what the scriptures promised about a heavenly Father who loved me, I still carried a story of abandonment in my gut. The problem wasn't a lack of intellectual conviction but a painful wound on the register of my imagination. I didn't need to know more; I needed to understand otherwise. The work of therapy was an exercise in what Martha Nussbaum calls "love's knowledge."

It was around this same time that I recovered another Augustine. Not the anthologized Augustine of philosophy textbooks, nor the pugilistic Augustine of his polemical treatises, but the Augustine I met in his sermons: Augustine the pastor, the shepherd, the empathetic preacher. In his conversational tone and pastoral warmth, this Augustine comes alongside his parishioners as a co-pilgrim, storm-tossed in the sea of this world, longing for home, listening with them to the promise of grace in the scriptures. It's not that he despises the hard intellectual work of *De Trinitate*; it's just that he understands that his pastoral vocation has different demands, that there is a kind of proclamation of the truth that is charity.

You can hear this camaraderie of grace in a sermon on Psalm 138 (139 for us). In Augustine's Latin Vulgate, verses 9-12 speak of a fraught journey:

If I take once more the wings that will carry me straightforward, and dwell at the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me, your right hand bring me through. I said, perhaps the darkness will overwhelm me, yet the very night was my illumination in my delight, for the darkness will not be further darkened by you, Lord. And night will be as bright as the day; its darkness is all one with its light.

In a remarkably evocative passage, Augustine enters into this anxiety about darkness with his congregation: even though Christ has given him wings to make his way home, he confesses, “I quail at the length of the journey, and I say to myself, *Perhaps the darkness will overwhelm me.*”

And yet. “*Yet the very night was my illumination in my delight.* The night itself proved to be light for me, because in the night of my despair—despair of ever having the strength to cross the vast sea, or to sustain so long a flight, or to reach the furthest shore by persevering to the end—he sought me out and found me as I fled.” Here’s the God who jumps down into the pit. Here’s the God who doesn’t just throw a life preserver but swims out into the sea to save us—who “pulled me away from disaster, and so made my night radiant.”

Drawing on the poetry of the scriptures, Augustine doesn’t just convey a truth, he pictures it. The very metaphor is an irreducible invitation, and extending it is an act of epistemic solidarity that no argument could accomplish. “As long as we are in this life, it is night for us,” Augustine recognizes. But even the night is illumined “by Christ’s descent into the night. Christ took flesh from this world and lit up the night for us.”

If I try to crystallize the change of mind I’m experiencing midlife and mid-career, it is some version of this question: How can I write to light up the night? If there is a pivot I’m still working through, it’s the reverberating effects of absorbing the distinct power of metaphor I see at work in Augustine’s preaching. It’s a conviction about communication, a sense of calling to be a very different kind of writer—not simply a philosopher with ideas to teach but a co-pilgrim alongside my neighbors, all of us wondering if the darkness will overwhelm us. I want to string together words that bear witness to the light in a way that people don’t just understand but can stake their hope upon.

In a way, Augustine went through a similar change of mind. As a young, eager, philosophical convert to Christianity—he tells us the “books of the Platonists” sealed the deal for him—one of Augustine’s first audacious acts was to abandon his post as a rhetor, “a salesman of words.” His conversion to the Logos seemed to demand a conversion from rhetoric to logic. And so he set off to what he hoped would be a philosophical commune, retiring to the examined life.

But, of course, his subsequent compulsion to the priesthood and eventually the episcopacy played out a very different story. The realities of pastoral ministry and the spiritual significance of preaching reversed his earlier course. By 426, when Augustine finally finished his manual for preachers, *De doctrina Christiana*, he had come full circle: what he articulates is the redemption of rhetoric. The Logos who became flesh isn't a divine syllogism but the *poiema* of God.

There is a deep consonance between rhetoric and love, a longing that is the poetry of the affections. "The mind is drawn by love," Augustine affirms in his *Homilies on the Gospel of John*. Thus he pleads, "Give me a lover and he feels what I am saying: give me one who yearns, give me one who hungers . . . give me one like this, and he knows what I am saying." God's revelation, he goes on to say, is not a message in a bottle, like bits of information sent across the abyss to be received by the intellect. Rather, God's self-revelation is a magnet for desire. "This revelation is what draws. You show a green branch to a sheep and you draw her. Nuts are shown to a boy and he is drawn. And he is drawn by what he runs to, by loving he is drawn, without injury to the body he is drawn, by a chain of the heart he is drawn."

What does it look like to bear witness to the truth in a way that is a tractor beam of the heart rather than a conqueror of the intellect? To write with allure rather than acuity? Writing that is revelatory not because it discloses but because it draws—pulling, enticing, inviting souls that are feeling their way in the dark to grab hold of the hand of grace? I have the sneaky suspicion this looks more like poetry than philosophy, that such work is accomplished more by novelists than theologians.

This change of mind is bound up with a vocational change of heart. Even early in my academic career, I had an unarticulated sense that part of my calling was to be a philosopher whose scholarship would serve wider audiences. Some describe this as the work of a public intellectual. I prefer to describe it as a kind of outreach scholarship, the hard work of translating philosophical insights for the sake of the church and the world.

In my philosophical cast of mind, this was mostly experienced as the temptation to become a pundit, penning think pieces whose astute analysis would help salvage our commonweal. For a decade, I thought success looked like landing at a DC think tank, putting my philosophical and theological insights to work on op-eds that would change the world because they would change how we think. (I was young.)



Needless to say, I've abandoned all hope that we can think our way out of the mess we've made of the world. The pathology that besets us in this cultural moment is a failure of imagination, specifically the failure to imagine the other as neighbor. Empathy is ultimately a feat of the imagination, and arguments are no therapy for a failed, shriveled imagination. It will be the arts that resuscitate the imagination.

So I'm back to Proust and literature. If love alone is credible, literature is truer than philosophy. Which is also why I left my post as editor in chief of *Comment* magazine and assumed my role as editor in chief of *Image* journal, a community of writers and artists bearing witness at the intersection of art, faith, and mystery. In the spirit of *tikkun olam*, Judaism's endeavor to repair the world, I'm throwing in my lot with the poets and painters, the novelists and songwriters. While Plato would exile them from his ideal city, these artists are the unacknowledged legislators of the city of God.

"Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense." This insight from Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* has never left me since I first read it. Indeed, the Rev. John Ames, narrator of the novel, looms large in my change of mind. Along with the whiskey priest in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* and the country priest in Georges Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*, Ames is the literary embodiment of a pastoral relation to truth.

There are layers to this: it's not so much that I learned new information from this fictional minister, but that Robinson's invention was more true for me than all my philosophical disquisitions. Her art found a way to say love; her words found a mode of incarnating the grace at the heart of the gospel. The novel, I was realizing, is a better match for the mysteries of mercy embodied in the crucified one now risen.

Somehow this is poignantly captured for me in this passage from *Gilead*, in which Ames, anticipating his death, writes to his young son:

I'd never have believed I'd see a wife of mine doting on a child of mine. It still amazes me every time I think of it. I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. You may not remember me very well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you.

The mystery, of course, is that it is precisely the novelist who has found the words. She has found them and sculpted them into a world that now captivates us. The novelist's prose is its own poetry of allure, akin to Augustine's "chain of the heart," drawing us, pulling us, to imagine this world once again as what it is: "a hurtling planet," as the poet Rod Jellema puts it, "swung from a thread / of light and saved by nothing but grace."

"Lovers are the ones who know most about God," von Balthasar writes; "the theologian must listen to them." Such listening best happens, I've concluded, in art. God's profligate grace for prodigals both whispers and shouts in Rembrandt. God's mystery radiates in the Provençal light of Van Gogh's painting (and echoes in Julian Schnabel's film about Vincent, *At Eternity's Gate*). God's mercy for us crooked image bearers is witnessed in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Toni Morrison. A longing for God's justice is the fire that fuels Coltrane's *Love Supreme* and even the prodigal passion of James Baldwin. No textbook on practical theology could ever rival the searing picture of the priest's calling, and humanity's complexity, in Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*. Such art doesn't try to change our mind, doesn't try to convince us, but rather effects a subtle conversion of the imagination. I need to see differently before I'll ever think differently.

There's a fascinating observation in Oliver O'Donovan's seminal work *The Desire of the Nations* that suggests an analogy. Commenting on the societal and systemic effects of Christianity on Western political life, he notes that there were "two frontiers within the Gentile mission: the church addressed *society*, and it addressed *rulers*. Its success with the first was the basis for its great confidence in confronting the second." If Christianity gradually came to make a dent on the institutions of political life, transforming the very dynamics of rule, it was because "Christ has conquered the rulers from below, by drawing their subjects out from under their authority."

This notion of conquering *from below* resonates with a philosopher in a unique way. After millennia, it remains hard to shake the baseline Platonic picture of the human person in which reason rules the passions and emotions. The rational person is ruled from above, as it were—something on which philosophers have agreed from Plato through Kant. That's why changing people, changing society, was always taken to be an endeavor of changing people's *minds*—to convert them from above.

I'm skeptical (and the behavioral economists will back me up). Instead, I think we will convert people from below, from the imagination up. Philosophy doesn't "speak" imagination. The logician speaks a tongue that's foreign to the heart. Poetry and literature and painting are a glossolalia that the imagination hears in its own language. And in our imagining, we may learn how to be human again, learn how to be empathetic and live with one another, just to the extent that we see one another again, in all our fractured complexity and mixed motives and dogged hopes.

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