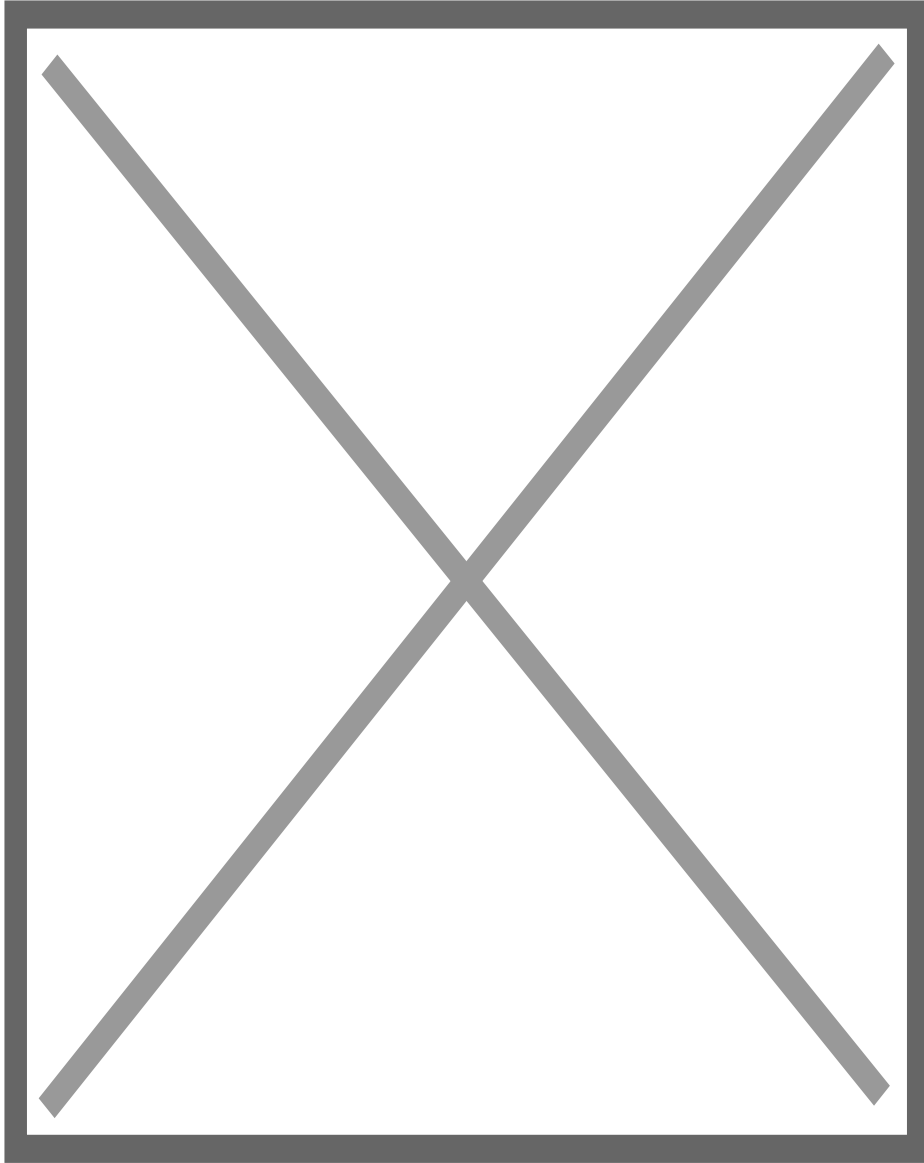


Augustine gave me a language for staying alive

The Korean concept of *hwa-yang-yeon-hwa* has helped me embody the theologian's idea of the *beata vita*.

by [Jessica Lee](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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I am a neurodivergent disabled woman, and for most of my life I was suicidal. Nearly every semester of my undergraduate studies culminated in my friends finding me unconscious or incapacitated, until one day, after my most dangerous encounter with death, my mother asked me: “??? ????” (Are you going to live or not?) I stood there, trembling with fear, and answered: “????.” (I’m going to live.) It was a promise.

When I first encountered the fifth-century theologian Augustine, it was not serendipitous and certainly not love at first sight. He was simply another author asking the question I was asking: What is it to live? Or rather, What is it to live well? But I found in Augustine an invitation into exploring what the true meaning of life could be.

Augustine wrote in Latin. When we read him in English, we are reading his words filtered down through scholars and translators. But translation is an art, not a science; each translation is an interpretation, and each interpretation can carry a host of problems. The *beata vita*, typically translated as the “good” or “happy” or “blessed” life, is an especially fraught example. These translations are insufficient to encompass the full breadth of what Augustine sought to describe.

“The good life” may seem easy enough to understand. Yet even though philosophers and theologians have argued for centuries about what goodness is, what it means in our everyday context is an entirely different question. Does the good have a concrete form we can hold, touch, taste? The more we contemplate the good, the more abstract it seems to become. Historically, many thinkers have taken “the good” to mean some sort of universal standard, a norm to measure society by. Yet if goodness is a measuring stick of a society’s ideals, those on the margins risk being labeled as evil. One’s perfection is another’s dystopia. Attempting to define goodness is not only difficult—it can be catastrophic. It may even cause a person not to want to live.

For Augustine, the good is not a containable object. It is not something intelligible and practical like a written command. It is not something we produce. Rather, it is the very definition of creation itself. Creation, everything created by God, is good. God is the good that we seek, and all that comes from the good is also good. Evil, for Augustine, is not an equal, opposing force to good. Evil is defined by the absence of the good, its privation. Evil has no substance of its own, and so all that is, is good. Translators err in translating Augustine with the phrase “the good life,” because “the good life” is redundant. In Augustine’s theology, all life is good. There is no good life; there is only life.

Is “the happy life” a better translation? Unlike the inexpressible “good,” we can feel happiness. We can’t necessarily grasp it or place it in a bucket, but it surges from within us. It is an emotion. But happiness has meant contradictory things. Some thinkers equate happiness with the more tangible experience of pleasure; others with the achievement of complete detachment. Both of these pathways are extreme. Both are dominated by a core emotion that is not happiness, but fear.

In contrast, Augustine’s *beata vita* interrogates fear. In *Confessions*, his search for the *beata vita* begins when a close friend dies. The sheer horror of loss and the severity of grief leads Augustine to search for a love that, once acquired, does not consume him with a fear of losing it. The solution he discovers is to love God, thereby overcoming fear.

“The blessed life” fails for similar reasons. It does not encompass the full breadth of what the *beata vita* describes. “The blessed” is, like “the good,” an abstract concept which is often manipulated and abused. The only difference between “the good” and “the blessed” is that the former is an abstract moral concept and the latter is an abstract theological concept. Who gets to say what counts as blessed?

“The good life,” “the happy life,” and “the blessed life” are all insufficient interpretations of Augustine. The *beata vita* can only come by the satisfaction of desire—the fulfillment of love—and it must be eternal so there is no fear of losing it. Only union with the beloved—with God—can make the *beata vita*, since God is the good and is eternal. For Augustine, the desire for God is implicit, a part of each person. The *beata vita* is thus attained by finding God: first within oneself and second throughout the world. The *beata vita* comes from a spiritual movement from one state of being to another.

The God whom Augustine seeks is not found in the fancy words of clever speakers nor in the stars of the sky. After failing to find satisfaction in the material world, Augustine turns to the inner person, where he encounters the source of life, being itself, dwelling within him. And it is beautiful. In this encounter, Augustine is transformed. It is only through knowing God that Augustine can even begin to perceive the world and himself more accurately—that is, as beloved.

For Augustine, to know God is not the same as knowing about God or of God. It is a personal experience, a transformation of an individual's framework of knowing. It is like learning a new language or entering a new genre. Knowing God is knowing love.

It is common in biblical discourse to use “knowing” as a euphemism for sexual intimacy. That euphemism is not far from what Augustine has in mind. That is not to say that Augustine's “knowing God” is of a sexual nature (though several medieval mystics provide such narratives). But knowing God is, for Augustine, far from a disembodied cognitive process. Augustine's knowing begins with doubt and the loss of a sense of self. It is sparked by the visceral pain of grief as well as a series of illnesses and an unrelenting addiction. Augustine's investigation is not merely a philosophical search but a desperate, existential longing for hope. It is a search for a reason to live.

Knowing God is the full, embodied transformation from despair to hope. It is the installation of new software, a new vocabulary for describing the world. This new system is love, which is beautiful. When we know God, we perceive the world through the lens of love, seeing its belovedness. This is the only true way to see creation, because creation was made out of love. Seen in this way, the world becomes full of the beauty of God. Life becomes, literally, full of beauty. For that reason, we might translate Augustine's *beata vita* as “the beautiful life.”

And yet, just as “the good life” asks a moral question, “the happy life” asks a quasi-psychological question, and “the blessed life” asks a weighted providential question, “the beautiful life” poses an aesthetic question. If we are not careful, it can make it seem as if Augustine's *beata vita* promotes a superficial lifestyle of arbitrary aesthetic standards. But the key point in the *beata vita* is precisely the opposite: It starts from within and then exudes outward. It is not an arbitrary standard of measurement from outside but a living reality expressed from deep within.

Perhaps we can look beyond the English language to better understand what Augustine means. There's a Korean phrase, *hwa-yang-yeon-hwa* (????), that I believe shines a light on his theology where English phrases fail.

*Hwa-yang-yeon-hwa* is a transliteration of four characters. The first *hwa* is the character for flower. *Yang* represents shape or form, and *yeon* represents time or moment. The final *hwa* means light, blooming, shining, glowing. The full phrase with all four characters directly translates to “the moment of a flower's blooming.” In East Asian culture, this phrase can represent several different things, including the traditionally perceived blossoming vitality of youth or the blooming of love. A famous 2000 Hong Kong film titled with the phrase translates it as *In the Mood for Love*. A 2020 Korean television drama with the same title translates it as *When My Love Blooms*. An album series by K-pop group BTS uses this title and translates it as *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life*.

The *beata vita* is life lived according to its original purpose, or—as Augustine and most ancient writers would say—according to “what is fitting.” Fittingness presumes there is an original order to things, a way things work, a logic behind everything. In fact, Augustine's earliest known written text—unfortunately now lost—was titled *On the Beautiful and Fitting*.

For Augustine, there are only two substances or forms of being: God and creation. God is an eternal substance, always present, being from being. Creation, however, is temporal. It is created out of nothing, by God who alone sustains it. Furthermore, because God is love and creation was made for this love, creation is also free. Humanity has a choice: to actively receive the love that God has given and to live in that relational promise, or to reject it and to live willfully without an active relationship with God. The *beata vita* encompasses all life that chooses to live actively in relationship with God, allowing that love to flourish within and through them.

The *beata vita* is not for show. There is no standard to measure it by, no end goal or trophy, no sign or symbol that marks a person who lives the *beata vita*. It is not about how I appear or what I do, but rather where my heart's attention points. And the heart's resting state, Augustine says, is God. People living the *beata vita* are focused on God, not on each other. There is only God to whom each heart is attended. That means that the true witness of the *beata vita* is God alone.

When we redirect our hearts to God, we return to our right order and live according to what is fitting: loving relationship with God. By the very nature of God as love and the unified totality of creation as beloved, each person becomes interrelated with others through the love of God. Loving God is effectively equivalent to loving each other. The *beata vita* is life in loving relationship with God, the source of life, the Creator who is love, who is found within. Through God, we are transformed, rooted, and grounded in the true meaning and purpose of life, which is belovedness. With hearts oriented toward God, we become realigned—not only with God, but with everyone else throughout time and space.

The *beata vita* is not a mandate. It is not something we achieve or possess, but something that is inherent to our very existence because of who God is. The very purpose of each individual existence is not dependent on anything we do. The meaning of life is “God loves,” and the purpose of each existence is an expression, a manifestation of that love. Thus, Augustine writes in a sermon on 1 John 4:4–12: “Love, and do what you will.”

“The most beautiful moment in life” is not a particular period in human history or in any individual's lifetime but rather the expression of God's love coming to life in each individual being. In other words, according to Augustine's *beata vita*, each human being is the most beautiful moment in life. Each person is the moment in full—not by their lifespan or by anything they do, but by their very existence—and it is perfectly beautiful: *hwa-yang-yeon-hwa*.

There is a full triangle of unity underlying the *beata vita*: loving God, loving self, and loving others. All three work together as one love. Loving God is the very means by which we can truly love others, but this loving of others by and in loving God cannot be properly understood without making direct reference to the self, who, just like everyone else, is a created and beloved human being. It is in loving God that the individual, the self, is able to return home, back to its origin, into the loving embrace from which it came. For Augustine, loving God is the ultimate way of loving the self, because it is what we were made for.

The tie between loving self and loving God inevitably results in loving others. Just as I find my rest in loving God and fully engage in loving my self according to my true identity as a beloved child of God, so do I love my neighbor, who is also a beloved child of God. Then, I recognize in my neighbor the same love that I have received, accepted, and enjoyed. Because it is one love from one God, complete and whole, it is realized as much in the other as in myself. This is the unity of God which extends into the unity of the *beata vita*, the *hwa-yang-yeon-hwa*, the most beautiful moment in life.

This unity is sustained and expressed through diversity. Each individual—each aspect of creation in every second and location of time and space—is uniquely designed as a one-of-a-kind expression of God's love. Just as we all live under one sun yet experience the revolution and rotation of the earth in unique ways, each of us is specially crafted as an expression of God's love. As unique expressions of God's love, we are invited to delight

in the love of God simply because of who and what we are.

The *beata vita*, realized in our unique existence, is the definition of worship, the act of praise. Worship and praise are not ritual facets of life; they are the very essence of life. The heart engaged in loving attention is worship, which means that worship, the lived expression of the *beata vita*, is as diverse as every breath that each of us takes.

The *beata vita* is not an easy way out. It is not a shortcut. It's simply what is. Augustine never promises that the *beata vita* is a solution to suffering, as if loving God means eternal bliss. If anything, the *beata vita* promises courage and hope in the midst of suffering. It makes room for an even deeper grief, in proportion to the greater love.

The *beata vita* is not something externally found but something that is discovered from within. It is necessarily available in its own unique form to every individual "in accordance with their faith." While "in accordance with their faith" may seem to be inaccessible to some, excluding those who do not measure up, that does not have to be the case. Faith is not a binary quality that one either has or does not have. The specific embodied expression of each individual is taken into account in terms of how the *beata vita* is manifest.

In other words, "in accordance with their faith" means in accordance with where, what, who, why you are. The love of God dwells within you. Thus, the *beata vita* is one, diverse, and accessible. The most beautiful moment in life is not defined or made by something we create. No one is excluded from the love of God, and love is the very reason we exist. Love is the reason to live.