

2 *Learning How to Live*

Spend your whole life learning how to live.

—SENECA

The world is so full of a number of things
That I think we should all be as happy as kings.

—ROBERT LEWIS STEVENSON,
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF VERSES

Memory offers up its gifts only when jogged by something in the present. It isn't a storehouse of fixed images and words, but a dynamic associative network that is never quiet and is subject to revision each time we retrieve an old picture or old words.

—SIRI HUSTVEDT¹

“SELF” IS DIFFERENTLY DEFINED IN different times/places. In the fourth century Roman Empire, “self” was defined by social location; women and slaves weren't “selves.” Medieval “selves” were defined by participation in the religious community; “heretics” weren't selves, but as threats to the community, must be exterminated. Early modern (reformation) “selves” were gradually coming to be defined by the individual's

1. Hustvedt, *Sorrows of an American*, 80.

religious commitment/beliefs. Since Freud, the “self” is largely defined by “sexuality” and sexual preference.

Augustine continued to be exquisitely aware of the missing self. The confident moments in which he plants the self firmly in God are usually preceded by palpable anxiety, rife with images of viscous liquids:

Entrust to truth whatever truth has given you and you will lose nothing. What is withered in you will flower again, and all your illness will be made well, and all that was flowing and wasting from you will regain shape and substance and will form part of you again (4.11).

Augustine had no scruples about mixing metaphors, for each image contributes to the complex picture he seeks to communicate: a dying flower; a sick person oozing putrid liquid. Or do these images refer to male sexuality, which Augustine has described, in his experience, as waste and loss? In any case, solidity—shape and substance—can only be regained in the God who *does not pass away*.

For Augustine, the integrated self was a project. It could only be reliably formed by being planted firmly in God, who alone guaranteed its reality. His youthful experience was of a broken and scattered self, lying in fragments, dissipated, and lost in many distractions (2.1). Augustine’s missing self was vivid and tortured; highly eroticized, it clutched at everything that crossed its path in the fear that something would be missed. This is not a mixed metaphor; fragments clutch! Augustine called this mode of feeling and action *concupiscentia*. The less satisfying the pursuit of sex, power, or possessions, the more insistently and strenuously does the person fascinated by them grasp at these objects.

Augustine was careful to say that it was not that anything he attempted to clutch was unworthy in itself; it was the anxious grasping itself that was the problem.

Certainly the eye is pleased by beautiful bodies, by gold, and silver and all such things. . . . Worldly honor also has its own grace. . . . The life too, which we live here, has its own enchantment because of a certain measure in its own grace and a correspondence with all these beautiful things of this world. And human friendship, knotted in affection, is a sweet thing. (2.5)

Augustine, the “bad” child, stole some pears because he wanted to have some fun with his companions. Later, the theft fascinated him, not because this sin was so heinous, but because of its sheer gratuity.

Augustine and the Fundamentalist's Daughter

There was no reason for it, no desire for those particular pears; it was not even big fun. So why do it? To be “one of the boys,” to experience an *enjoyment of what is forbidden for no other reason except that it was forbidden*. In fact, the act of choosing and doing imitates God’s activity in creating; it is a *darkened image of omnipotence* (2.6). Later, Augustine related to friends with the same eroticized grasping. He evoked very vividly the *foggy exhalations which proceed from the muddy cravings of the flesh and the bubblings of first manhood* (2.2). He was, he recalled, *ashamed not to be shameless* (2.9). Not ready for *true peace and life imperturbable*, he became *to myself a wasteland* (2.10).



A snapshot of me when I was two shows me sitting on a feeding trough among chickens on my grandfather Miles’s farm in eastern Ontario. I appear relaxed, leaning chubby arms on my spread knees, offering the viewer a (later horribly embarrassing) glimpse of white panties. The picture tells a story: my grandfather had a large fenced chicken yard, with dozens of chickens pecking in the dust. On other days when Grandpa had brought me into their pen, I had been terrified because the chickens, disturbed by our arrival, rose into the air to about my height, frantically squawking and raising clouds of dust in my face. On the day the snapshot was taken, Grandpa instructed me that if I would

just remain still and wait for a minute, the chickens would settle back down and resume their pecking in the dust. I did it, and the feeling of triumph over my terror was tremendous.

That episode became a model for me of how to act when overwhelmed by noise and dust in whatever form. When I gave my interview lecture at Harvard, for example, I feared most of all the moments after my lecture when I anticipated that all those intelligent and learned people would attack, disprove, and demolish my thesis. But I remembered the chickens, and I invited several questions and observations before responding to those that intrigued me. Sure enough, the noise and dust settled quickly—the questions were not unfriendly—and there was a lively and helpful exchange. Thanks to the chickens!



I came to awareness of myself as *a piece of difficult ground, not to be worked over without much sweat* (10.16) in Three Hills, Alberta, Canada, named for the three tiny hills that barely interrupted the rolling prairie. My father taught at the fundamentalist Prairie Bible Institute. I recall bleakness. A train passed noisily at the bottom of our yard; when it rained, moisture seeped through the walls; indoor “plumbing” consisted of a port-a-potty in the basement that was emptied once a week by students while we sat at Saturday evening dinner. We bathed in a galvanized tub in the kitchen once a week, whether we needed it or not! In memory it was always cold. Mother had a miscarriage, and since Three Hills had only a nurse, a doctor was called from a neighboring town to give her a dilation and curette, which he did without anesthetic. I was seven, and supposed to be asleep in the next room. I was instead listening in terror to Mother’s screams until they remembered me and took me to a neighbor’s house.



We were Canadians. Every Christmas morning we gathered around the radio and listened to King George VI give his annual state-of-the-union address. He stammered badly, and mother tearfully suffered for him as he struggled to speak.



I wrote my first autobiography in Three Hills at the age of seven. Writing was a lonely eldest child's attempt to construct and stabilize a self. I yearned to be a good girl, but I often found that I was a bad girl in others' eyes. And others' eyes were decisive; a child has no eyes of her own through which to see herself. It didn't take much to be considered bad in a fundamentalist household and community, and there was no distinction between "bad acts" and "a bad person." An example: I was one of the younger children in my one-room schoolhouse so my desk was near the front. The door was behind me, and I was not supposed to turn to look when it opened and someone entered. But I did, not once but several times, and my knuckles were rapped hard with a wooden ruler for doing so.



Throughout elementary school I was never in the same school for more than two years. My intransigent fundamentalist father had a difficult time finding churches that agreed with him in every theological detail; hence the frequent moves. The issue was usually around "dispensationalism," a theological position whose meaning eludes me now as it eluded me then. We moved several times across Canada—Brantford, Ontario, to Three Hills, Alberta, to Calgary, Alberta—and, when I was eleven, to the United States. Alongside his work as the minister at the First Baptist Church of Wenatchee, Washington, my father entered a community college, eventually obtaining an MA at the University of Washington, and a by-mail doctorate. For the rest of his career, he alternated between two professions, sometimes a college teacher, sometimes a minister, switching back and forth when his sensitive "nerves" got troublesome. He was unable to tolerate criticism; any disagreement or criticism could prompt another resignation. Once an office worker told him that he had not been exhibiting much of the joy of the Lord recently, inspiring him to tell her that her work hadn't been very good lately either.

My parents created for me a world with clear rules for behavior, a world in which everything had religious significance. Nothing simply happened; nothing was coincidental. When I disobeyed or was otherwise "bad," I was punished by being assigned to memorize a chapter in the Bible. The theory behind this was based on Psalm 119:11, "Thy

Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee.” If I sinned, it was because I did not have enough of the Word “by heart.” The solution: memorize more Scripture!



I was a pretty little girl, thus arousing my parents’ fears that I could easily go astray, enticed by “worldly things.” Since I was very likely to do wrong, I was always suspect, so they were always vigilant. My grade school teacher and parents thought me a sloppy child, especially in comparison with the little girl who lived next door and who had excellent, neat penmanship. Once I accused a small boy of pushing me from the narrow path into mud; I don’t remember if he really did or not, but I was blamed for falsely accusing someone who had recently been “saved” and had mended his ways.

The shorthand term by which my parents described what they feared most in me was “pride.” They took every opportunity to undermine any pride I might reveal. If someone remarked that I was pretty, Mother replied, “You should see her at home!” This happened many times. I suppose she was referring to how I looked with my hair in curlers (even though my hair was naturally curly). The problem was that they did not distinguish between “pride” and self-confidence or self-esteem, and thus I grew up with none of the above. Instead I developed a deadly impasse between desperately wanting to please in order to get love, and wanting to do things, have fun, and grow up.



I was given my first “store-bought” dress when I was thirteen. Until then, hand-me-down dresses, most of them ugly, from families in the church had clothed me. As a teenager, I liked to take the bus to downtown Seattle occasionally to window shop after school. One day I was looking through a rack of dresses when a woman from my father’s congregation saw me and offered to buy me a dress. She did, and I still remember that dress.

I was considered vain because I cared what I wore. As an adult, I have a revised version of “vanity.” Vanity occurs not when one feels pretty, but when one feels ugly. Preoccupation with how we look is very

common among women who have grown up with media images of what female beauty looks like. But eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, and the more flagrant results of negative “vanity” were not common when I was a child. Eight-year-olds did not worry about their weight, as is presently common. My family did not have television until after I married and left the home. I was not allowed to go to movies and I could not afford magazines, thus billboards were usually my only information about how I “should” look. So I was probably spared the worst effects of unrealistic standards.

The fundamentalists of my childhood were painfully ambivalent about female beauty. They had little of Augustine’s sense of natural beauty as revelatory of the beauty of its creator, but mainly worried that beauty, especially female beauty, was seductive, potentially harmful not only to its possessor, but also to others, especially men. Mothers are expected to be the liaison between patriarchal culture and daughters’ frightening potential to grow up “wild.” Among other things, it is the mother’s job to train her daughter to place her attention on how she *looks* rather than on how she *feels*. My mother did a good job. She trained me so well that still, some sixty years later, I know—or think I know—what the person I’m with feels long before I laboriously figure out what *I* feel.

“What will people think?” My parents thought that a minister’s family ought to model perfection for “clouds of witnesses.” And I tried to please. More than anything I wanted Mother to say as she tucked me in bed, “You’ve been a good girl *all day*.” However, there was a downside to my need for love and approval. Wanting love and approval so badly was what prompted me to lie.



I learned to lie for self-protection or advantage. I believed myself the perfect example of what it was to be a sinner, my “real self coming out.” Augustine wrote, *I, so small a boy, and so great a sinner!* (1.12). I began to learn the spicy by-taste of furtive pleasures; “secret” and “pleasure” seemed to me to be synonymous. This learning deepened in my teenage years. I have had to work at overcoming this penchant for secret pleasures all my life.



We emigrated to the United States when I was in the fifth grade. To my parents, the “States” was an alien and wicked place, characterized pervasively by “Hollywood.” Doubly alienated by nationality and religion from the values of American culture, an “us” and “them” mentality dominated. Nothing was “us” but home and church, and even then Dad felt that the church members needed frequent reproofs. Some of the women wore lipstick, and he detected increments of “worldliness” in many of the members. My school was an especially troublesome arena. Notes were sent to the teacher on days that we were to have folk dancing, to the effect that dancing was “against my religion.” I longed to dance but instead sat against the wall while my schoolmates danced. If I questioned why an activity was wrong, my question proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that I was in imminent danger of being “them”: “If you have to ask . . .” my parents replied.



I was not allowed to go to movies. So when a film titled *The Missing Christian* was shown at my church I anticipated it with great excitement. Unfortunately it also gave me bad dreams and night sweats for several years. Based on the New Testament book of Revelation, its protagonist was a young girl who was not a Christian. The “rapture” occurred, taking all Christians to heaven and leaving only evil people to launch and endure a reign of terror on earth. Mercifully, I forget the details, but the combination of reinforcing my anxiety about whether I was really “saved” with the visual depiction of evil people doing harm to one another was very frightening.



The damages—emotional and physical—of being a child brought up in a fundamentalist’s household were—are—profound. My siblings and I each bear lifelong scars from the constrictions and expectations of our childhood home. However, tempting as it is to maintain a helpless victim position, to focus on my feelings of neediness and resentment, it is not accurate, and not enough, to simply trace the scars and their origin. There was also passion and anguished love. Life was not boring.

Augustine and the Fundamentalist's Daughter

Attending an Al-Anon meeting, I saw a film about children of alcoholics. It described the problems they have and how these problems tend to shape their personalities. At the end of the film, the narrator commented that children of strict religious upbringing tend to experience the same damages as those from alcoholic homes. This made perfect sense to me. The commonality has to do with the constant orientation to maintaining the peace of the home, not causing parents' anger, always thinking first of pleasing the parents, and a compulsive alertness to the atmosphere of the home. With such attentiveness to parents, the child has no opportunity to craft a chosen identity.

I think that Dad would now be diagnosed as suffering from depression; we thought of him as "moody." My sisters and I became expert in reading his moods and acting accordingly. Sometimes, in a good mood, he joked and played with us; he lay on the living room floor and we would run by him while he tried to grab our ankles. Big fun. Mother would call from the kitchen (always, in my memory), "Someone is going to get hurt." And frequently, someone did, but it was worth it for the rare fun. Sometimes, however, Dad was in a black funk, irritable and angry at everyone and everything, especially those closest to him. On those occasions it was wise to keep a low profile.



Dad was not an ogre; rather, he suffered. He tried to contain his moods by working in his beautiful garden, in which vegetables and flowers were mingled in no apparent order. His other great passion was the violin. He could not remember why, in 1925 at age fourteen, he ordered a T. Eaton mail order fiddle and took lessons from a local Scottish fiddler. He played hymns on the violin all his adult life; in senior years he played with a few amateur musician friends in convalescent hospitals and retirement homes. He loved the old hymns best: “Rock of Ages,” “My Faith Looks Up to Thee,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” “Blessed Assurance,” and many others. He also enjoyed newer hymns, such as “In the Garden” and “How Great Thou Art.” He assumed that people old enough to be in assisted living situations had had Christian childhoods and could be expected to recognize and love the “old favorites.” He was not always right about that. Sometimes his efforts met with hostility. Not everybody remembered those hymns with affection!

What is difficult to tell accurately is Dad’s bewildering mix of judgment and sweetness. His judgments were often very harsh. Behavior that other parents would have dismissed as unremarkable childish naughtiness reminded Dad that children are sinners from birth. The fundamentalist parent’s task is to squelch children’s sinful willfulness and construct from scratch in them habits of good behavior. Dad punished minor infractions with a wince that each of his children dreaded; all of us can still see that wince in our mind’s eye. But most of Dad’s punishments after we reached the “age of accountability”—seven years old—were verbal, vivid scoldings that reduced us to feeling ourselves the painful disappointments we were in Dad’s (and God’s) eyes, reduced us to nothing, to dirt. Yet we much preferred an angry father to a sorrowful Dad. Dad’s sweetness made his harshness and/or his sadness over our behavior unbearable.

After his retirement from full-time ministry, Dad taught English as a Second Language at the University of Washington. He loved his international students, recording and enjoying their humorous mistakes in English. I’m afraid they were also helpless victims of his missionizing efforts. Proudly he told us that these students would return home to become leaders in their countries. He did not inquire about their political leanings! Whether they became dictators, tyrants, or humanitarian leaders, he was determined that they would speak grammatically correct English.

Mother baked all the family's bread. On the rare occasions that she was unable to do so, we ate white Wonder Bread. I am ashamed to recall that my sisters and I were excited on these occasions, exclaiming "Wow! Store-bought bread!" Proving that "the grass is always greener . . ."



Why not make life as wonderfully, terrifyingly, indigestibly rich as possible? Why not raise the stakes of human life to time beyond time—eternity—and space beyond space—heaven and hell? This is what my parents' fundamentalism did. Yes, of course we're all here now, treating each other variously, oblivious to some cruelties and acutely sensitive to others. But just beyond the stage on which we play our parts there's *real* life, *real* good, *real* evil. Our intentions and actions only imitate this real life in approximate and clumsy ways. Our best good falls far short of real good; our worst moments of blindness and nastiness, mercifully, also fail to qualify as real evil.

The presence of that other world was always palpable. It was a strange world, a world so strange that we won't even know how to breathe its air when we get there. But it was also a world so intimate that we will instantly recognize everyone. It will feel *ours*, fitting us perfectly. We learned about that other world, the world that leaned so heavily on the one we occupied, in Sunday School. Earnest teachers instructed us each Sunday morning in the hour before church about God's methods of dealing with human beings as recorded in the Scriptures. It was a spotty record, as far as I could see. God was inconsistent, often using overkill punishments for minor misdeeds like "pissing against the wall," while he blinked at, or even put people up to, major atrocities like wiping out whole populations. Our teachers' valiant efforts to wrestle a simple moral for fifth-graders from these stern Scriptures showed through their brave presentations. Our questions were not welcomed unless they provided an occasion for the reinforcement of a moral lesson.

Sometimes we had "sword drills" in Sunday school. The leader called out a verse location—"Ezekiel 2:4"—and we searched for it frantically, hoping to be the first to jump to our feet and read it aloud breathlessly. This exercise was intended to enhance our familiarity with Scripture, not so much because we listened when the verse was read—we didn't—but because it helped us "learn our way around" in

holy writ. The more competitive of us memorized the order of books in the two testaments in order to compete successfully in these sword drills. Though certainly unintended, sword drills were counterproductive. There could have been no more effective way to turn our attention from the content and meaning of Scripture verses to the competition to find them first.

Sunday school papers reiterated and reinforced the lessons we learned in Sunday school. They also provided my first experience of religious images. In the iconoclastic fundamentalism of my childhood, the only religious images we saw were on calendars and Sunday School papers. These were invariably crudely representational in style and featured men in brightly colored bathrobes, sometimes following sheep, sometimes conversing earnestly; once, memorably, they were throwing stones at a woman in a bathrobe. I must have been about eight when a calendar featured a girl of about my age leaning chubby arms on a windowsill, staring out into the star-studded night. Beneath, the caption read: “There is no God beside me.” The archaic meaning of “beside”—except—was lost on me, and I was perplexed by this apparent reversal of what I thought was the *main thing* my parents wanted me to understand, namely that there *is*, there *always is*, a God beside me.

The summer I was ten, our Sunday School papers featured a series on the Ten Commandments. Each week on the front page there was a full-color illustration of the breaking of one of the commandments. We waited for the seventh week with poorly disguised eagerness. When it arrived, it showed, in living color, a milkman pouring pitchers of water into vats of milk. Under the picture the text read: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”



Beliefs were important, but they were not the most important thing. The fundamentalist culture was the most important thing, being “us.” “Them” was always out there, threatening; there had to be clarity and precision about our difference from them. The ritual moment that marked this difference was baptism. “Believer’s baptism” was the rule in our Baptist church. The person being baptized must *choose* to “follow Christ” and state that choice before the congregation by undergoing immersion in the large tank behind the curtain on the church platform.

On the wall behind the tank, a pastel scene representing the Jordan River was crudely painted.

Everyone was baptized in a white robe made from a sheet. In the tank, the minister asked each one if she or he believed in the Father. They always said yes. The minister then held their nose and bent them backward into the waist-deep water until it covered their heads. This was repeated for acknowledgment of belief in “the Son” and “the Spirit.” Then the newly baptized moved awkwardly up the font’s stairs, dripping, the thin robe clinging revealingly.

When I was nine I asked for baptism. I had been under some pressure. Subtle but pointed hints that since I had made it to the “age of accountability” it was time to “make a decision.” I sensed my parents’ fear that a beloved child might neglect or resist, and thus become “them” instead of “us.” If that were to happen, mother assured my sisters and me, the “circle would be broken,” and she would never have another happy moment.

How could I be responsible for such a thing, I asked myself, when it was really so relatively painless to get baptized? Yes, painless, part of me responded, but certainly embarrassing. Yet the longer I waited, the more embarrassing it would be. If I expected to do it at all, I should do it while I had a straight up-and-down body to be revealed by the clinging white sheet. Besides, I wanted my parents and the church members to rejoice over me, as they promised they would when I was baptized. For a few dazzling minutes, the whole congregation would love me. That thought was delirious; it tipped the balance. I told mother I wanted to be baptized. She cried for joy

My friend, the late Harvard Ethics professor James Luther Adams, had a somewhat different experience of baptism. His father, like mine, was a Baptist minister. His father’s church baptized converts in the punishingly cold ocean—an ordeal for both baptizer and baptized. On the day of the boy Jim’s baptism, the congregation gathered on the beach to witness this cosmically significant event. When his turn came, Jim panicked and fled up the beach, running for dear life. His father pursued him, caught him, and brought him back to where the congregation waited. Then he baptized him forcibly, dunking him in the ocean three times, without further ceremony.

Do such baptisms, whether subtly or overtly coerced, have the desired effect? Augustine thought of baptism as nearly magical. He tells of

a friend whose family had him baptized while he was lying in a coma, close to death. His friend awoke changed, unresponsive to the unconverted Augustine's teasing. Even if one doesn't credit such a magical interpretation of baptism, coercion was not all there was. An increment of chosen self, a sense of acceptance in the church community, a rite of passage: these were the evident benefits of baptism.



“Have I imagined them richly enough?” Toni Morrison asked, referring to the characters in her novel *Jazz*. The narrative of my family should try to explain how each generation came to terms with the harshness and beauty of life. In my grandfather's generation the harshness was largely held at bay. He occasionally retreated to his study for whole days. My father suffered more obviously from “nerves” that eventually forced him to retire early from both ministry and teaching. In my generation, the harshness began to overwhelm and outweigh the beauty, constricting or crippling the lives of my siblings and producing in me an ulcer at age twenty-two. In my children's generation, several collapsed into addiction. How do we explain to ourselves these effects, these slipping-down lives, if we reject, as I do, the scriptural statement that the “sins of the fathers” are visited on their children? (By the way, that is not a Scripture that fundamentalist parents were fond of quoting!) At present we imagine that the strong undertow of genes, mingled with cultural designations about what constitutes pleasure, direct us to act as we do. But, “have I imagined them richly enough?” Surely twenty-first-century language surrounding addiction and self-help do not make room for richly imagined people.



Around the age of ten I frequently lay awake in a cold sweat, fearing that I would die in the night and go to hell. The strong sense of sinfulness communicated by Calvinist religion was not alleviated or balanced by (nonexistent) assurances either of my goodness or of God's mercy. The doctrine of original sin, at its best, might be expected to relieve feelings of personal sin, but it certainly didn't do that for me.



As a child I was invaded and occupied. No secret place in my psyche, no self, belonged to me. The all-seeing eye of God—and his representatives, my parents—demanded *me*, not something I could give or do. I will probably never get over a fear of being engulfed, appropriated, and overwhelmed by someone. As a young woman in psychotherapy, Carl Rogers' "client-centered therapy" worked well because my therapist offered few interpretations. He listened and he *backed off* in order to give me room to *come out*. And I came out! Given the slightest invitation, I came out. Lusty, full of desires, coveting life, bursting with energy. The "me" that came out was a surprise.

The true self is aggressive, rude, dirty, disorderly, sexual; the false self, which mothers and society instruct us to assume is neat, clean, tidy, polite, content to cut a chaste rosebud with silver-plated scissors.²

A memorable cartoon, heavily (if unconsciously) inspired by the Calvinist view of human nature, features a man saying, "You'll have to excuse me. I'm myself today."

2. Malcolm, "Annals of Biography."