

### **“A Gift” by Denise Levertov**

Just when you seem to yourself  
nothing but a flimsy web  
of questions, you are given  
the questions of others to hold  
in the emptiness of your hands,  
songbird eggs that can still hatch  
if you keep them warm,  
butterflies opening and closing themselves  
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure  
their scintillant fur, their dust.  
You are given the questions of others  
as if they were answers  
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps  
this gift is your answer.



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### **THE WISDOM OF QUESTIONING: AUGUSTINE (354-430, present day Algeria)**

**You are great, O Lord, and very worthy of praise;** mighty is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable. And humankind, which is part of your creation, wishes to praise you; we who bear the burden of mortality, who carry it around as a testimony to our own sin and to your opposition to the proud. And yet still we wish to praise you, we who are part of your creation. You rouse us to take delight in praising you, because you made us for your own and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Grant me, O Lord, to know and understand whether we should begin by calling upon you or by praising you; and whether we must know you before calling upon you. But who can call upon you without knowing you? For those who do not know you may pray for something that is not you. Or should we rather pray to you in order to learn to know you? But how will people call upon you if they do not believe in you? And how will they believe in you without someone to preach the Word? Those who seek the Lord will praise him, for they who seek him will find him, and when they find the Lord they can but praise him. Let me seek you, Lord, by calling upon you; and let me call upon you when I believe in you; for the news of you has been preached to us. It is my faith that calls upon you, Lord, which you granted me, which you breathed into me through the humanity of your Son, through the ministry of you preacher. (*Confessions*, 1:1,1)

**What am I then, my God?** What is my nature? Life is full of variety and impossible to measure. Consider the broad expanses of my memory, its innumerable caverns and lairs. Each one is filled with countless different things, placed there either by means of images, as in the case of all physical objects, or by their actual presence, as in the case of skills, or through some notion or impression, as in the case of emotions (for even when the mind is not experiencing these, they are still retained in the memory, although whatever is in the memory is in the mind). I run through all these things, darting this way and that and delving into them as deeply as possible but I never come to an end. So great is the power of memory, so vibrant is the force of human life even though it is mortal.

What then should I do, my God, you who are my true life? I will pass through this faculty of mine that is called memory; I will transcend it to reach you, sweet light. What is it you are saying to me? Look how I am rising upwards through my mind toward you who are always above me. I am passing even beyond that power of mind that is called memory, for I wish to reach you by the only way it is possible, to cling to you in the only way I can. Birds and beasts also possess memory; otherwise they would not be able to find their way back to their nests and lairs or do all the many other things they are in the habit of – in fact, without memory, they would not have any habits. So I will transcend memory, too, in order to reach him who has set me apart from the four-footed creatures and made me wiser than the birds in the sky. I will transcend memory, too, so as to find you, my true good, my sweetness in whom I can trust. But where am I to find you? If I find you beyond my memory, then I have no memory of you. And if I have no memory of you, how can I find you? (*Confessions*, 10:17,26)

**Too late have I loved you, O Beauty, ancient yet ever new.** Too late have I loved you! And behold, you were within, but I was outside, searching for you there—plunging, deformed amid those fair forms which you had made. You were with me, but I was not with you. Things held me far from you, which, unless they were in you, did not exist at all. You called and shouted, and burst my deafness. You gleamed

and shone upon me, and chased away my blindness. You breathed fragrant odors on me, and I held back my breath, but now I pant for you. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and now I yearn for your peace. (Confessions, 10:27)

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**The symbolic value of the question mark** is its openness toward broadening horizons of understanding. Through questioning we enhance and amplify our existence...Questioning itself is an enabler of confidence and faith, not an enemy of them (Tillich). Indeed, it is a vital expression of faith.

A possible role model for this experience of joyous questioning in Western philosophical and religious traditions is the Platonist Christian theologian Augustine. Charles Mathewes, in his study of Augustine's *Confessions*, argues that...for Augustine, "questioning...is not simply a prolegomenon to faith or praise but, in fact, a vital expression of it." We may expect *Confessions* to end with the climactic moment of Augustine's conversion experience...but Augustine's story is about learning to ask questions in the right way:

*Augustine's new perspective was one of learning to be 'eschatologically patient' rather than 'apocalyptically impatient.' This allowed him a more relaxed attitude than permitted by the habituated demand for a complete comprehension of previous foretastes, a demand that expresses an impatient anticipation of (and implicit demand for) a nearly immediate resolution and end to his questioning...It was when Augustine realized the character of his life [seeking after the depth of divine mystery], that it became possible and necessary for him to 'endure' the 'continuing tension'... of living with ever unfolding questions. But it should be clear by now that "enduring" the "continuing tension" of such questioning is in fact not merely something one suffers regretfully; it is, rather, a mark of being alive. To come and see the joyous endlessness of such questioning, and to begin to inhabit it, it to pass from death into life."*

Like Augustine, we too can come to affirm life through questioning without end. While we undergo questions as they occur to us, while we literally 'suffer' them, they are not something to regret or rid ourselves of. They are a way we express and enhance our experience of being alive...While a completion can function as a regulative ideal toward which we strive, it is not something we need to demand happen here and now. We need to give up on our compulsive need for immediate gratification or satisfaction in completion. Open questions contribute to cultivation of openness to further experience, more dialogue, and greater understanding.

*Using Questions to Think: How to Develop Skills in Critical Understanding and Reasoning by Nathan Eric Dickman, 2021*  
*Charles T. Mathewes, 2002, "The Liberation of Questioning in Augustine's Confessions." Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

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#### **In Praise of Dancing | Augustine**

I praise the dance, for it frees people  
from the heaviness of matter  
and binds the isolated to community.  
I praise the dance, which demands everything:  
health and a clear spirit and a buoyant soul.  
Dance is a transformation of space, of time, of people,  
who are in constant danger of becoming all brain,  
will, or feeling.  
Dancing demands a whole person, one who is  
firmly anchored in the center of his life, who is  
not obsessed by lust for people and things  
and the demon of isolation in his own ego.  
Dancing demands a freed person, one who vibrates  
with the balance of all his powers. I praise the dance.  
O human, learn to dance, or else the angels in heaven  
will not know what to do with you.

#### **Love Never Disappears | Augustine**

Love never disappears for death is a non-event.  
I have merely retired to the room next door.  
You and I are the same; what we were for each other,  
we still are.  
Speak to me as you always have, do not use a different tone,  
do not be sad.  
Continue to laugh at what made us laugh.  
Smile and think of me.  
Life means what it has always meant.  
The link is not severed.  
Why should I be out of your soul if I am out of your sight?  
I will wait for you; I am not here, but just on the other side of  
this path.  
You see, all is well.