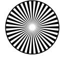

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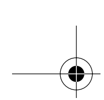
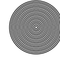
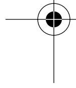
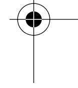
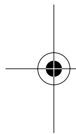
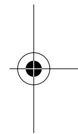





Introduction

Perhaps in providence all students are gifts, and yet some stand out as gifts of grace: their eagerness for God and eagerness to learn make them a joy to teach.

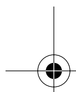
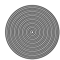
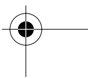
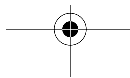
Just a few weeks ago I got a letter from one whose name on the envelope brought to mind a young woman whose student days were marked by her articulate, passionate commitments about the meaning of life, and of her own life. Unusual in her maturity, Lori already knew that education had to be, for students who take the gospel of the kingdom seriously, more than a passport to privilege. She was so good at understanding the nuances and writing about the complexities that I read her papers to my faculty colleagues. Like me, they needed to know that some students take it all seriously, really wrestling with the reading and its implications for life and the world.

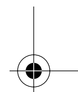
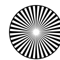



Lori's letter came in response to an essay I had written for *The Washington Notes,* a publication sent to alumni and faculty friends of the American Studies Program. "Embracing the Brokenness" was a reflection on the centrality of that call for all vocations—even as we, in imitation of Christ, face the fallenness of the world in its tragedy, injustice and sadness. In particular, I had written about how incredibly hard it was for several students I had taught over the previous year, from institutions as diverse as Stanford, Harvard and Calvin, as they moved from the academic arena into the world of work, trying to meaningfully connect their faith with their vocational visions.

Lori wrote:

> Where to begin? I cannot believe that a year-and-a-half has passed since my convicting semester in Washington. . . . So many memories of my learning, laughing, and discovering parts of myself, new per-

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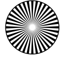
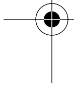
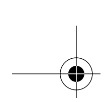
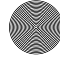
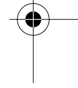
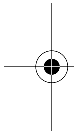
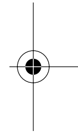


> spectives, and the face of God. Oh, how I miss the stimulation, challenges, mental exercises, guidance and controversy of that joyous and unforgettable fall. So many times I have started letters to you that were never mailed for one reason or another. I was so excited to find the American Studies Program newsletter on my kitchen table when I returned from a long day at work, and I sat down after dinner to read it. I was but halfway through your article when I started to cry, and Scott asked me what I was reading. I could not explain to him how your words grabbed on to my heart, and I cried for my own exhaustion and frustration with the brokenness I see daily. . . . How do you keep at it? How do you keep going? What words do you use to pray?

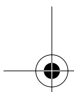
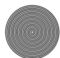
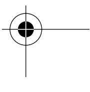
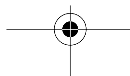
She went on for many pages, telling of her new marriage and her job as a social worker. Of the job she wrote, "I'm sure you can imagine that I have certainly seen some brokenness." The weight of her letter, though, came in the next paragraph:

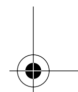
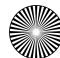



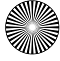
> I do not hate my job. Our caseloads are low here, I enjoy the staff, and the pay and benefits are generous. I just don't find the work rewarding. I have seen and heard so much in the families I work with and "help," and the problems seem so mammoth. I do appreciate the relationships I've built with some of my clients, but I am so overwhelmed. I realize that one reason I'm so unhappy is that I miss the mental stimulation and intellectual discussion of college and my hospice internship. Steve, if I remained mentally alert and absorbed in all that I deal with, I couldn't get up in the morning!

A few pages later her last words were these: "I hope you and your family are doing well. Your secrets for dealing with the brokenness are coveted by one who has been blindsided by the reality of the world."

Why do you get up in the morning? For nearly twenty years I have been teaching university students in many different kinds of settings—both those laboring away at secular-spirited institutions and those within Christ-centered colleges and universities, both undergraduates and graduate stu-



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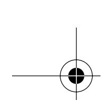
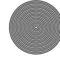
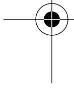
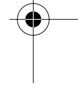
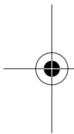
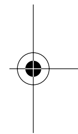





dents, both within the classroom as a professor and outside as a campus minister—and in a variety of ways I have asked this question. It gets at the relationship between what one believes about the world and how one lives in the world, particularly as that dynamic interaction is being formed as young people begin to move out of their parents' worlds and worldviews and take up their own convictions as frameworks within which to live and move and have their being. But it also focuses a student's attention, asking for a good reason to get up beyond the call of the cafeteria or the classroom.

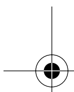
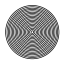
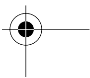
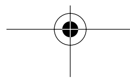
At heart that more playful question is rooted in more substantive ones: Which commitments will give shape to my life? Is my life about something that matters? What do I really care about? In this vocation of talking to students about the issues of life, I have had countless conversations like the one in this letter. Often they are face-to-face, but more often they come in correspondence; typically the world of higher education is not a place where ideas and consequences are clearly connected, and so "the reality of the world" has not yet been faced in all its fallen fury.

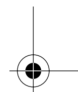
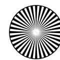



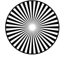
But it does come, every time and for everyone. The good news is that my student friend wrote, conscious of her need to work through the difficulty of coherently connecting what she had learned with how she would live. That has always been the challenge for those whose callings take them through the university on their way into the rest of life.

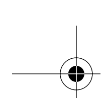
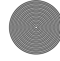
Hundreds of years ago, on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, a young African named Augustine took up this journey into the academy and beyond. A brilliant student, he was torn between the pressures from his father to succeed, achieving along the way all of the human honors attainable to someone so young and able; his mother, whose vision of her son's success was rooted in her own love for God, yearning that academic achievement might be the means by which he would come to embrace her own deepest loves; and his friends, whose selfishness and vanity only served to stimulate him to his own natural vices, Augustine found himself retrospectively self-conscious of the transformation he was undergoing: he was entering into a crucible in which *moral meaning* was being formed.[1]

In *Confessions,* after acknowledging an especially grievous time of telling "lies to my tutors, my masters and my parents," he recalls,

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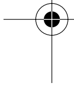
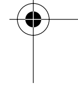
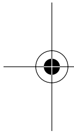
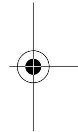



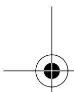
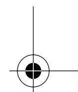
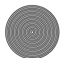
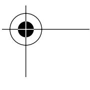
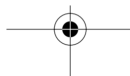
> These were the ways of the world upon whose threshold I stood as a boy, and such was the arena for which I was training—more concerned to avoid committing a grammatical error than to be void of envy in case I did commit one and another did not. . . . This I say and confess to Thee, O My God: and in this I was praised by those whom my one idea of success was to please. I did not see the whirl of vileness into which I had been cast away from Thy eyes: for what was more unclean than I. . . . Is this boyhood innocence? It is not, Lord. I cry Thy mercy, O My God. Yet as we leave behind tutors and masters and nuts and balls and birds and come to deal with prefects and kings and the getting of gold and estates and slaves, these are the qualities which pass on with us, one stage of life taking the place of another as the greater punishments of the law take the place of the schoolmaster's cane.[2]

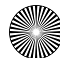



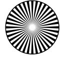
In every generation the years between adolescence and adulthood have been ones in which people have asked the cosmic questions and wrestled—for better or for worse—with answers. This period of intense self-scrutiny led Augustine to reexamine his deepest assumptions about God, human nature and history. From his academic mastery of Cicero to his delving into the philosophy of the Manicheans, through those years between boyhood and manhood he was aware of what, in our time, Erik Erikson has called "the existence of developmental crises."[3] As Augustine looked back on that experience, from the perspective of years later, his heart was full of the lament:

> O God, my hope from my youth, where were You all this time, where had You gone? For was it not You who created me and distinguished me from the beasts of the field and made me wiser than the birds of the air? Yet I walked through dark and slippery places, and I went out of myself in the search for You and did not find the God of my heart. I had come into the depths of the sea and I had lost faith and all hope of discovering the truth.[4]

And yet through the faithful love of his mother, Monica, the "dark and slippery places" were not endpoints, but only points along the way. With "the courage of piety . . . she multiplied her prayers and tears that You





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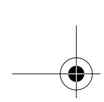
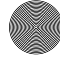
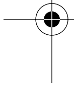
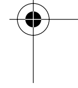
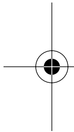
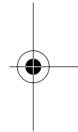





should hasten Your help and enlighten my darkness. . . . She took it for granted that I had to pass on my way from sickness to health, with some graver peril yet to come, analogous to what doctors call the crises."[5]

Erik Erikson, professor emeritus of human development at Harvard until his recent death, influenced a generation of scholars with his seminal thinking on the meaning of the life cycle. About "crises" in the stages of human development he wrote:

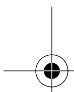
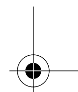
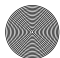
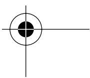
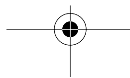
> I must briefly define this ancient little word. In clinical work (as in economics and politics) crisis has increasingly taken on half of its meaning, the catastrophic half, while in medicine a crisis once meant a turning point for better or for worse, a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable. Such crises occur in man's total development sometimes more noisily, as it were, when new instinctual needs meet abrupt prohibitions, sometimes more quietly when new capacities yearn to match new opportunities, and when new aspirations make it more obvious how limited one (as yet) is. We would have to talk of all these and more if we wanted to gain an impression of the difficult function—of functional unity.[6]

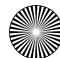



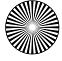
It is this notion of "functional unity" in the face of crisis that connects Augustine and Erikson, bridging the centuries and the cultures which separate them.

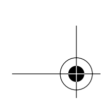
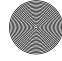
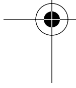
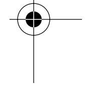
And it is this vision of "functional unity," particularly as it is formed during the university years, that this book explores. In Erikson's understanding, an individual could develop an identity that stood against the "disorder, dysfunction, disintegration, anomie" of the modern world, thereby coming to be "the strong person" whose life was marked by a deepening integrity which, in his words, "can balance despair."[7]

Wherever one listens in on the world of today's students, there are echoes of anomie. But if we listen closely enough, we notice that these deep-seated worries about existential choices and their eternal consequences are not new, much as they do in fact characterize the student experience in the contemporary world. Rather, in some sense they are endemic to that unique period of time between adolescence and adulthood when choices about mean-

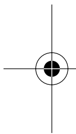
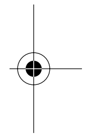




ing and morality—what one believes to be real and true and right—are being made (choices which, more often than not, last for the rest of life). Whether it is Augustine wrestling with the "crises" of his own life and faith fifteen hundred years ago, or countless others whose stories chronicle the developmental dynamics of these critical years, time and again we are allowed in to view, as Erikson saw it, "a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable."

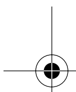
One of the most widely respected observers of the modern world, as it was coming into being a century and a half ago, was the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville. His memory of "an incident in my youth that marked me deeply for the rest of my life" is one more story of a student straining for an identity and integrity of his own, and painfully aware of his stumbling along the way.

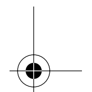
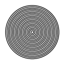
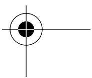
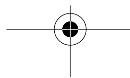
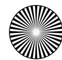



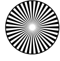
> I heaped pell-mell into my mind all sorts of notions and ideas which belong more properly to a more mature age. Until that time, my life had passed enveloped in a faith that hadn't allowed doubt to penetrate into my soul. Then doubt entered, or rather hurtled in with an incredible violence, not only doubt about one thing or another in particular, but an all-embracing doubt. . . . I was seized by the blackest melancholy, then by an extreme disgust with life—though I knew nothing of life—and was almost prostrated by agitation and terror at the sight of the road that remained for me to travel in this world. . . . I see the world of ideas revolving and I am lost and bewildered in this universal motion that upsets and shakes all the truths on which I base my beliefs and my actions.[8]

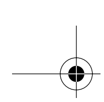
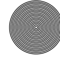
His biographer writes, "Suddenly let loose in the world of ideas, he felt his own universe totter."[9]

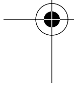
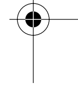
Augustine, Tocqueville—and Billy Corgan? As I wrote the first edition of this book, *Rolling Stone,* the pop culture chronicle of rock music, had a cover story on one of the most hip groups doing music in the 1990s: Smashing Pumpkins. Their newest album at the time was titled *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness;* they consciously appeal to kids moving through the awkwardness of adolescence. Though they are embarrassed by their reputation as "the



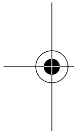
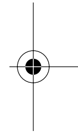


poster band for dysfunctional America,"[10] their lyrics are in fact a sad reflection of the "disorder, dysfunction, disintegration, anomie" which Erikson argued shape our experience in the modern world. In their concerts Corgan would proudly wear a T-shirt bearing the name of his song "Zero." Its vision of human life under the sun—"god is empty just like me . . . I'm in love with my sadness"—is an eerie echo of Augustine's "O God . . . where had you gone?" and Tocqueville's "I was seized by the blackest melancholy."[11]

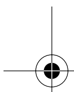
The "dark and slippery places" of Augustine's youth are there for every generation, as the years between adolescence and adulthood are a tumultuous time, anywhere and everywhere. Many students, perhaps most, emerge from their university experience ready to take on the world; the idealism of youth, we call it. But then somewhere along the way the reality of life in the fast lane of adult responsibility hits—sometimes like a ton of bricks, sometimes like acid rain. In a thousand ways they see how hard it is to be faithful to family, at work, in politics. Day in and day out they experience disappointments in every part of life—*every* part of life—and see how hard it is to be hopeful (and therefore responsible) actors in human history as they try to be neighbors to those next door and to those around the world.

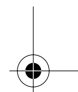
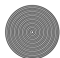
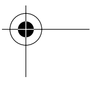
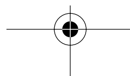
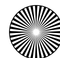



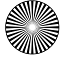
The cartoon "Non Sequitur" captures this brilliantly, allowing us to smile even as we see its sober realities. Titled "Post Graduation," it shows the hallway of an academic building with an open classroom door identified by the words REAL LIFE 101. Six feet below, an undergraduate is lying face down on the sidewalk, smashed flat against the concrete, his papers strewn all about. Nearby is a sign that reads: WARNING. NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY EVER.

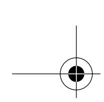
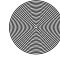
And yet there are students who come through that crucible with habits of heart and mind so in place that they move on into the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood without compromising their basic integrity or giving in to the cynicism of "realpolitik," "realeconomik" or "realaesthetik."

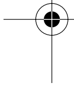
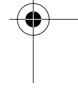
Who are they? What happens during their university years that so forms their vision and virtues that they make it through the proverbial "valley of the diapers" of their twenties and thirties with their convictions and character intact? How does a person decide which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life? How do students learn to consci-





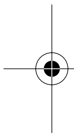
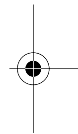



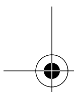
entiously connect what they believe about the world with how they live in the world?

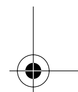
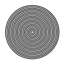
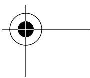
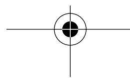
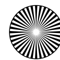
It is the exploration of these questions that forms the substance of this book. My study takes its place within a literature that ranges from sociology to psychology to educational theory to philosophy and theology.

The thesis amounts to this: The years between adolescence and adulthood are a crucible in which moral meaning is being formed, and central to that formation is a vision of integrity which coherently connects belief to behavior, personally as well as publicly (chapter one); the conditions of modern consciousness, especially as they are manifest in the modern university, make it increasingly difficult for young people to come through those years with the habits of heart required to develop and sustain that kind of integrity (chapters two and three); the perspectives of the history of ideas, the ethic of character and the sociology of knowledge provide windows for understanding the challenge people face in forming a coherent life (chapter four); and it is those who develop a worldview that can address the challenge of coherence and truth in a pluralist society (chapter five), who find a relationship with a mentor who incarnates that worldview (chapter six), and who choose to live their lives among others whose common life is an embodiment of that worldview (chapter seven) who continue on with integrity into adulthood. Finally, the White Rose tells of students whose vision and virtues enabled them to see into their own moment in history and to act with unusual courage in the face of one of the greatest horrors of the twentieth century (chapter eight).

Weaving together belief and behavior during the university years is no small thing. And yet in every generation lovers of Christ have given heart, soul, mind and strength to that task. After the dark and slippery places of his adolescence and early adulthood, by amazing grace Augustine finally found the God of his heart. In the years that followed, his study and service eventually led him to an appointment as the bishop of Hippo. In that setting his deepening understanding of God, human nature and history, and his analytical ability—so finely tuned over the years of his academic training in rhetoric—made him much sought after as an arbiter of orthodoxy in his own time. Among those whose questions wound their way to Hippo was a



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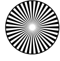
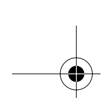
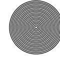
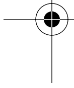
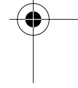
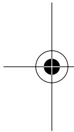
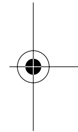


well-educated Roman layman who asked, "What do we believe?" As an answer to Laurentius, and as a gift to the centuries that have followed, Augustine wrote a long letter in which he wove together the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The *Enchiridion,* a handbook on Christian belief, has served the church in every generation since. The Benedictines saw it as "verily a book of gold, to be kept in hand night and day." Recently one Augustinian scholar remarked: "Of all the works of St. Augustine, no other one, surely, has occupied the attention more continuously than the *Enchiridion.*"[12]

Toward the end of his letter, Augustine sums up his lifelong reflection on the meaning of Christian doctrine and discipleship: "For when there is a question as to whether a man is good, one does not ask what he believes, or what he hopes, but what he loves." Simply and profoundly, Augustine brought together what my own more limited experience and ability has concluded, as I have wondered how we can teach students a worldview that will become a way of life.

If we could hear him asking Laurentius a question in return, it would be this: "What do you love?" It is in that question and the spiritual dynamics implicit in its answer that belief and behavior are woven together.