Collected Essays

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Figure 1. Ary Scheffer, Sts Augustine and Monica, The National Gallery.

Confessions

Shortly before Easter 2014, my family visited me in the United Kingdom, where I was studying Christian theology. I rode the train to meet them in London, where I planned to deliver the news to dad myself. Mom already knew. Months earlier, I had requested from her a copy of my Presbyterian baptism certificate, which she located and provided without judgment, reasoning that there were worse things a young person could get up to in a foreign country than converting to Catholicism.

It was late when I made it to their hotel, where I met them in an upstairs lounge. We caught up for a little while before I mustered my courage and came out with it.

“I’m converting to Catholicism next week,” I said. “That’s when we do it: Easter.”

At first my dad did not believe me. After all, why? To them, converting to Catholicism did not seem like something I would do. Up until that point my parents had thought of me as most parents of that era likely thought of their adventurous, college-aged children: leftish, radicalized by the 2008 financial crisis, inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, no ally of anything establishment or retrograde. They knew I was very religious, but conversion likely made even less sense to them given my strong faith: Why mess with a good thing?

I was baptized as a child in a Presbyterian church my family attended for a time, but was raised Methodist. I liked my Methodist church, though I was not ever sensitive to its doctrinal uniqueness. I knew we believed in a kind of free will before I knew what sort of theological conviction that belief ran up against. I knew we relied heavily on the Bible, though we were not as thoroughly literal as others. I knew we believed in being kind and orderly and that our pastors were learned and gentle and trusted to guide and illuminate, though each of us went alone before God.

When I left home for college many states away, I intended to keep up with my Methodist churchgoing but didn’t. Our Protestant chaplain was a profoundly humane Quaker with whom I spent a great deal of time, and in the light of our friendship I periodically attended meetings of the Society of Friends. I appreciated the authenticity and earnestness with which the Quakers pursued God and thought it appropriately humble to sit silently under the white beams of a New England meeting house and await Him.

But I was restless. In the quiet of the meeting house I would let my mind circle around threads of Scripture, moving like a spiral, inward toward meaning. But as the spiral tightened toward a kernel of truth, difficulties began to snare the lines. Already I was reading rapaciously about the histories of the biblical texts: their journeys through translation and interpretation; their auditions for the canon and those that did not make the cut; the late additions and redactions. I had not been raised to think the Bible totally bereft of metaphor or allegory, but these were problems of authority, not interpretation. Who could say what was symbolic or literal, what was historical artifact and what was currently applicable instruction?

Protestantism charges the individual conscience with many, if not all, of these interpretive duties. The trouble, as I came to see it, is that while Scripture must contain at least some meaning that is stable over time, consciences are not. Not only do individuals change over the course of a lifetime, inclining them to different (though entirely honest) interpretations; people change as cultures change. And some of those shifts in society and culture have major ramifications for how (or

whether) we understand the things we read.

Take, for example, the winding historical journey of charity. The word *caritas* appears multiple times in the Latin text of the Bible and is usually translated into English as either “love” or “charity”; different translations of the same passages can feature either, as an attempted correction to the problem that follows.

The King James Bible renders 1 Corinthians 13:3 as “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.” To contemporary readers, especially those outside the Catholic tradition, that verse may seem a little odd: How is it possible to give all of your possessions to the poor without doing charity? Doing so would appear to be the very definition of charity.

But the word has changed over time. As the scholar Eliza Buhrer points out, the original term Paul used was the Greek word *agape*; but, inspired by Cicero, Jerome, in the fourth century, translated it into Latin as *caritas*. That choice, Buhrer writes, “cemented the idea that caritas would forever be associated in some way with poverty,” though it certainly bore no such inherent association in its original Latin usage.

Thanks to Paul’s use of the term *agape*, early Christian writers (including Augustine, who never used caritas to mean almsgiving) were very cognizant of the difference between *caritas* and what we would now identify as charity. But throughout the middle ages, Buhrer observes, sermons and homilies on poverty began to conflate *caritas* with giving itself, and though the church would always distinguish between the two uses, they blurred in the popular religious imagination.

These days, charity in popular usage refers almost exclusively to almsgiving or other activities that support people in need; the less-apt reading of *caritas* won out. Thus, one often hears the popular talking point among politically conservative Christians that assistance as administered by the state is not charity, because it is compulsory — an argument meant to refute Christian arguments for state-funded welfare programs. This idea draws from both senses of charity, the antique and the medieval. On the one hand it suggests there is no moral imperative for Christians to pursue a robust welfare state because the Bible actually counsels love, something that cannot be coerced; on the other, it seems to accept that the term charity itself denotes the giving of goods.

It is possible to resolve the confusion: True, love cannot be coerced, and that which is given without love is not given in the spirit of *caritas*; still, it is entirely possible to build political institutions that ensure humane conditions for the least of these out of *caritas*. In that case, the charity is not in the transmission of goods to the poor, but in the initiative to create a world where those transmissions reliably take place.

And yet, so much depends on one word and its tangled history. It seems unlikely that the average reader of the King James Bible can be expected to have researched and understood the different uses of *caritas* — I did not do so until graduate school — yet one would be ill-suited to grasp the full meaning of 1 Corinthians 13, not to mention the political discourse that rests on it, without having done so. We read words as we understand them, but words change over time, and so do we.

As a student, I became increasingly aware of the problems these textual knots posed for the way I had been taught to relate to God: How could I read my way to God by the light of my own conscience if I was not even entirely sure of the meaning of what I was reading, much less my

ability to read it reliably? And in the course of all that confusion, as if by divine providence, a professor assigned St. Augustine's *Confessions* in one of my classes.

I began to read Augustine compulsively. I devoured the *Confessions* and *City of God*, then moved on to his letters, his sermons, the *Soliloquies* and the *Enchiridion* and on and on. Some five million words of Augustine's writings survive, and I wanted to read them all.

I loved his clarity of mind, his incredible intellect, his dazzling charisma. I loved, as a young adult, all that intensity — the strength of his feelings for God and the world, his passion. But I also appreciated the service his writings provided in terms of navigating difficult texts: Without quite knowing it, I had begun to rely on the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.

Tradition provides a chain of provenance beginning with the original biblical texts and extending down into our present year, with scholars and clerics reading their predecessors and puzzling out how to apply their thinking about God and his people to new questions that arise with time. Instead of leaving a single conscience to the knotty business of making sense of ancient texts, the tradition offers Christians a chorus of helpful coreligionists passing down insight over time. An individual's conscience plays a role, of course, in her own interpretation of the tradition; but the weight of time and expertise are instructive, and they whisper through space and centuries that you are not alone.

I had been persuaded that this method of dealing with interpretation and authority made sense by my experience of Judaism. Early in my career at Brandeis, my predominately Jewish college, I had the privilege of taking a class with a rabbi who approached familiar texts with an inquisitive, demanding intellect, but also the company of several hundred interpreters, whose collective thinking bore weight and balanced the affective prejudices of modern readers against those of the ancients.

College is likely when most people come into Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and though I had read them before I, too, found my interest in left insights into political economy refreshed around that time. And it made me all the more curious about Augustine, who seemed to speak for a manner of thinking that could critique and even reject the aspects of modernity that are corrupt without receding into sterile nostalgia or abandoning the witness of history altogether. The reasoning was just as flexible as it needed to be, and no more. It was beautiful, elegant even.

As a Protestant, I had learned that commentaries on Scripture were just that: the ephemeral striving of mere mortals, bereft of meaning in their own right, useful only insofar as they happened to be correct according to one's own judgment. But more and more I was convinced I could not carry out a Christian life by myself. I did not want to read and draw my own conclusions; I wanted guidance, clarity, authority. God had not seen it fit to leave Adam alone in Eden, nearer to God than we are now. He needed help, and God gave it to him.

I began to see God had already done the same for me. I just had to accept it.

Plenty of converts to Catholicism prize the church's prudence when it comes to evaluating modern conditions. Because the church is a pre-modern institution, it does not take for granted many of the givens of modernity: that personal freedom ought to be endlessly maximized, for instance; that the most important goal in life is finding oneself; that politics and religion are two sharply and rightly separate spheres.

In an essay in 2005 about his conversion to Catholicism from Episcopalianism, R. R. Reno, editor in

chief of First Things, wrote that “modern theology is profoundly corruptive. The light of Christ must come from outside, through the concrete reality of the Scriptures as embodied in the life of the Church. The whole point of staying put is to resist the temptation to wander in the invented world of our spiritual imaginings.”

By “modern theology” Reno means the (mostly) liberal theology that rose up after the Enlightenment to defend Christianity from its cultured critics. In those defenses, however, Reno finds a profusion of mere theories — thin lattices of argumentation constructed to prop up denominations whose commitments, if not their doctrines, are compromised. “What my reception into the Catholic Church provided,” Reno wrote, “was deliverance from the temptation to navigate by the compass of a theory.” Instead of the ephemera of ever-generating theories, Reno found he could rely on the solid pre-eminence of the Catholic Church, whose internal life is marked by striking continuity with the past.

Ross Douthat, a prominent columnist for The New York Times, described his reasons for converting in similar terms in 2014. While Douthat noted that he could “easily imagine [Andrew] Sullivan, or some of my other eloquent critics, regarding the remarriage-and-communion proposal as an ideal means of making their conservative co-religionists grow up, of forcing us to finally leave our fond medieval illusions behind and join the existentially-ambiguous, every-man-a-magisterium chaos of our liberal, individualistic, postmodern world,” he suspected a reversal on the issue of divorce and remarriage could undercut what drew many to Catholicism in the first place: a long, documented historical integrity that has withstood political and social pressure to change.

Reno and Douthat, both of them sensitive and extremely learned critics of culture, religion and politics, are also (as one might expect of those with a healthy skepticism regarding modernity) political conservatives. I, with equal concerns about many of the conditions that make up the current political and social order, am not.

Part of the reason I found Catholicism’s challenge to modernity so compelling was that it critiques aspects of our world that mostly go unquestioned, even by those who have disputes with liberalism in sexuality, marriage and so on. For me, the case in point was property ownership, the underlying question beneath all our current debates about poverty and wealth.

Early Christian writers, Augustine among them, thought deeply about the nature of creation. God made our material world, of course, but what for? Knowing what the bounty of the earth was meant to achieve would help them figure out how to use it rightly, that is, in accordance with God’s will for it and for us. In the view of the early church (and indeed, in the view of the church today), the world had been made and given to all people to hold in common to support their flourishing. “God made the rich and poor from the one clay,” Augustine wrote, “and the one earth supports the poor and the rich.”

Property entered the equation with sin. Since people could no longer be trusted to honor the original purpose and use of creation, governing authorities were able to maintain order by dividing it up. But the church remained sensitive to the pre-property purpose of creation, and with its own authority (throughout the Middle Ages, for instance, ecclesiastical courts heard many cases regarding property and contracts) and power to persuade states and subjects, it urged vigilance against the tendency of the wealthy to amass more than their due, to the detriment of the poor. Individual actors departed from the counsel of the church, of course, but never succeeded in altering its doctrine to advance their own purposes.

But that changed after the Protestant Reformation. While Erasmus and Thomas More had each been meditating on the common ownership of all things just prior to the schism, Luther and his adherents took a different approach. Reacting to the radical communitarianism of the Anabaptists, the Reformers took the view that all things ought to be held in common as a thin veil for idleness, debauchery and sloth. With their assault on the authority of the established church, they sapped the moral force from the church's teaching on property, which was now up to each person to decide for himself; and with their remonstration against the temporal authority of the church, they appointed the regulation of property strictly to the state, which was meant to order human affairs toward sober efficiency, not some final good.

In the years after the Reformation, increasingly strongly articulated and absolute rights to private property gained ground in European thought, finally flowering into "the rights of an individual to resist the extractions of both church and state," per British historian Christopher Pierson in *Just Property*. If this situation sounds familiar, it is because it is the rallying cry of almost all those who resist efforts to broaden our country's support for its poor. Taxes, they say, are theft, and governments have no right to seek the good, only the maximal liberty of its client-citizens.

Yet the church remains firm, unmoved by this current in modernity. And while it is impossible to speak for all Protestants — and important to note there exists a vast array of opinions on property ownership within the Protestant tradition, some hewing close to the Catholic view — the Catholic Church, at least, bases its position on property in a moral universe far more stable than that which has been constructed since the Reformation. And by the time I neared the end of my time in college, I had become convinced it was the only firm ground from which a Christian could fight back against the domination of the poor by the rich, against poverty, against the destruction of families and communities at the hands of businesses and their political lackeys, against a world stripped of meaning.

By the time I graduated from college, I knew I was not through with Augustine. I left for the United Kingdom at the end of my first summer out of college, where I would earn my M.Phil. in Christian theology, with a focus on Augustine. I studied under an Anglican priest and Christian socialist whose reading of Augustine deepend mine, and it was somewhere between our meetings that the seed that had been planted some time earlier came to fruition. When I told my tutor I intended to convert, it seemed like something I had already put off too long.

In retrospect I do not remember my confirmation very clearly. I was confirmed during a very early Easter Vigil, around 4:00 a.m., in the Catholic chaplaincy at Cambridge University.

I walked to the chapel in the dark: it was cool and damp, and nightclubs were still releasing Saturday night's revelers in a trickle into the streets. By the time I reached the chapel I was awake on pure adrenaline, exhausted but alert. I was electrified and dazed throughout Mass, aware enough to remember the dreamy surprise I felt when I realized a professor of mine was holding the chalice I drank from for the first time; too tired to recall what she said to me afterward when we all gathered upstairs to celebrate.

When I went home that morning it was daylight — very bright, and all the mist had warmed to dew. My friends parted ways near the chapel, and I walked home through a few little alleys that rounded gardens where light-colored roses were already in full bloom. It is in my nature to wander, and I had never seen the streets so bright and placid before, but I was too worn out to linger.

I felt changed when I arrived back at my room, though everything seemed the same: a desperate pile of books by my bedside, a stack of xeroxed papers spread over my desk and the *Confessions* alone on my squat nightstand. I fell asleep contented, following the shape of the letters on its spine. It felt good to rest.

Faith

A week before my daughter was born, my husband lost his job. It was unexpected. I came home from work just a little early one day because I thought I had felt a contraction — I didn't know what it would feel like, having never given birth, and so I thought every pain could be a sign of labor.

When I came inside, I saw my husband's shoes by the door. It wasn't time for him to be in yet. I looked up and there he was, sitting in the rocking chair we had bought for me to use when nursing our baby. And he was slouched with his head in his hands, so then I knew.

I don't remember much else about what happened then, other than that at some point I pulled so hard on the medal I was wearing — a miraculous medal, imprinted with an image of the Virgin Mary — that the clasp broke.

When I gave birth a few days later, the pain was unmistakable.

My husband and I came home from the hospital and looked for jobs for him. Sometimes when a job seemed especially promising I would go to church and light a candle and pray, although I still hadn't fixed the clasp on my medal and didn't wear it. It laid on the surface of my dresser and was buried in short order under towels and rags and baby clothes.

I had felt, maybe because of all my prayers, that things would soon look up. It made sense that things would get better quickly.

In late June, while my husband was out shopping for a suit for interviews, he received a phone call from his father in Texas. My husband's sister, he said, had been murdered. She was 29 years old.

When my husband came home, I was in bed with the baby. Both she and I were glazed with sweat. Our bed is near a window; outside there are only the staggered roofs of other buildings, plain and tan, some of them sometimes crested by birds. I had fallen asleep watching crows rising up in the shimmering heat.

When he woke me up all I could hear through my daze was that she had passed away.

It was only later that he used the word *murdered*. A man had attacked Heather in the trailer she shared with two other women — a mother and her adult daughter who had previously lived out of their car. Heather was engaged and looking forward to her impending marriage. She had sporadically studied accounting after high school but spent most of her time working as a waitress at Cracker Barrel and Red Lobster. She had always been poor; she had never known anything other than being poor.

Red Lobster helped pay for her funeral. Dimly I thought of God's love for the poor. Where could it have gone? Where was God now?

My husband flew to Texas, and I slept with our daughter, only a few weeks old. She woke up often then, hungry, and I would nurse her. In between I drifted in and out of a fitful twilight sleep, still aching from birth and worry. I wanted to see my husband, but I had run out of encouraging things to say. We were both exhausted. I would try to pray, only for my mind to wander into broken thoughts. I had a strange dream.

In my dream, I wandered down the aisle of some kind of noisy, crowded theater. At the front, where a stage should have been, were confessionals. I went inside one to repent and there was no priest there, only a screen with the face of a priest. I said to him: “Father, I’ve lost my faith.”

I should tell you the story of my medal.

In 2014, my grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She underwent surgery, and my mother visited her in the hospital often. It was a long recovery.

One evening my mother came home from the hospital and showed me something.

“I spotted this in the parking lot,” she said. There was a dull, nickel-colored oval in her hand. On one side I could make out the image of the Blessed Virgin, but the other side was coated with chewed gum and dirt.

I am a convert. My mother, a Methodist, wasn’t sure what this pendant could be. Neither was I.

I cleaned it up with dish soap and tweezers. It had been scraped on the asphalt, but I could read the words: *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee*.

The next time I was out, I took the medal with me in a plastic bag. I brought it to a jewelry shop and had it put on a simple black cord with a lobster clasp, and from then on I wore it very often, thinking as much of whoever had lost it in the hospital parking lot as of my mother who picked it up out of the filth for me as of the Blessed Virgin herself.

The police were able to tell us that they had caught Heather’s killer driving her car, which he had stolen. She had been stabbed in the neck. There was very little more they were willing to say.

A couple of job opportunities seemed very likely. I would pray and ask all my friends to pray. I trust that they did.

But nothing came through.

For a while during the long, hot summer I entertained the superstitious idea that things would not look up for my family until I had the clasp of my medal repaired. I did not think I was being punished for breaking it, but I thought I had damaged some trust by doing that, and that I couldn’t fix it until I did some penance by way of cost and trouble.

But things got in the way. There is so much to carry when you go out with a baby. I would always think of taking it with me when I thought we might pass by a jewelry shop, but some other thing — a bottle, a rattle, a just-in-case bundle of socks — would always occupy my hands instead.

Summer stretched on. Our baby grew; she did not wake up so much in the night anymore, and she could smile and laugh. I prayed for the soul of my sister-in-law, and for my husband’s family and my husband, who occupied himself with our baby so as not to dwell too much on everything that was lost. I didn’t rush to light candles for possible jobs anymore. It didn’t seem to be any use, and I thought I had made my hope on that front clear enough. God would listen or He wouldn’t.

I had days of greater and lesser certainty. Mostly I thought God was listening. That was the fact that made me feel so restless: *Why are You listening so quietly? I know You’re there.* A whisper of doubt sometimes passed through my thoughts: *You’re only thinking like this because it’s likely another job*

will come along. If it were something less likely, you wouldn't feel so sure.

In August I visited my gynecologist's office for a postpartum checkup. Everything looked to be in order. She asked me if I had felt sad since the baby had been born, or hopeless or lost. She asked if I had spent many hours crying.

I lied to her. But on the way home, in the still midday street with sun flooding upward from the pavement, I impulsively stopped my taxi short of my apartment building.

I departed from the road into the cavernous darkness of a church.

It wasn't time for confession, but there was a priest in the sacristy who I asked, when he emerged, if he would hear my confession. He led me by the shoulder to the confessional where I knelt down and rested my forehead on my folded knuckles.

I don't have any more faith, I told him.

But you're here, he said. He was patient. It took a long time for me to say anything. Slowly I recounted everything that had happened over the past few months, though I didn't tell him about my medal — somehow even then I was still too cowardly to tell him about my medal.

He listened. He said, at last, that while faith can be a comfort, it can also torture you. *It can tear at you in times like these*, he said, with his hand fixed like a claw. *Because you know everything could be made better. But it isn't.*

The line between religion and magic, I learned in school, isn't clear. But many scholars of religion agree that one important division is that while magic is private and crisis-oriented, religion is public and its rituals have no specific, short-term, earthly goals.

Christianity has no magic, and that may be just as well.

Eventually a job came along. The way that it happened was very prosaic, the way most jobs are. Nothing about it felt miraculous. I couldn't discern any sign in it, but I know there must be one. It isn't always important, I now think, to feel moved. Sometimes faith is an act of will. Maybe it mostly is.

What can I say: That my faith wasn't injured? It was wounded.

But wounded things heal.

By the fall our baby had grown so much she could no longer fit into her first baby clothes. I decided to put all of them away for the next baby, and so went through our apartment gathering up every sock and onesie marked for a baby up to three months. In doing so I uncovered my medal, still looped on its broken cord.

I was never going to have it fixed, I realized. It wasn't realistic. Having the clasp of a cord repaired was no longer possible in the scheme of the life I had now.

Nor did I have to. I slipped it from the cord and onto an unbroken silver chain I'd bought someplace a long time ago. It looked different, but wore just the same.

Motherhood

If someone had asked on the day of my college graduation whether I imagined I would still be, in five years' time, a reliable wallflower at any given party, I would have guessed so. Some things just don't change. What I would not have predicted at the time is that five years hence I would be lurking along the fringes of a 3-year-old's birthday party, a bewildered and bleary-eyed 27-year-old mom among a cordial flock of Tory Burch bedecked mothers in their late 30s and early 40s who had a much better idea of what they were doing than I ever have.

Nobody was remotely rude to my husband and me, though our differences were fairly obvious; at most, they seemed a little surprised to find a pair of 20-somethings in a situation like ours. That much — and the dreamy gaze of one driven to distraction by love of their child — we had in common.

When my husband and I compared notes after the shindig, he recounted a sly line of questioning spun by a curious partygoer that he thought was aimed at determining how, given our ages, we could afford the ritzy preschool that our daughter attended with theirs. "She was trying to figure out if it's a welfare thing or a scholarship thing," he chuckled. It was the former. Families living inside Washington, D.C., which we did at the time, are entitled to free preschool; those living in the suburbs outside the district have to pay tuition. The fact that our little girl could spend a few hours a day learning and playing on Mayor Muriel Bowser's dime was the best part of living in the mildewy two-bedroom condo we owned, and it certainly made being young parents in a major city considerably easier.

Which isn't to say that it was *easy*. As a rule, having and raising children is never easy; this is especially true in the United States, where, compared with similarly developed countries, parents enjoy relatively little support. And while recent conservative caterwauling over the push for subsidized child care suggests America won't be joining the ranks of the Nordic countries in terms of parental benefits any time soon, the loss may be as much theirs as anyone's — it is, after all, the right that frets most vocally about the nation's declining birthrates. (The 2020 census data, released last month, showed that over the last decade, the population grew at its slowest rate since the 1930s, in case you've so far been spared the ensuing panic.)

Insofar as the current baby bust is related to lengthening delays in childbearing among younger generations, one might suspect birthrate hand-wringers would have a special interest in relieving the financial hardships associated with having kids, but one would be somewhat mistaken. While a slim vanguard of right-leaning statesmen have backed policies that would shore up struggling families, they have met resistance from their own side. Most conservatives tend to argue that the financial concerns voiced by hesitant would-be parents are less salient than their cultural habits, like individualism. And so it goes in the culture wars.

The case for young parenthood would be simpler to plead if it weren't for that particular back-and-forth — snowflakes this, boomers that. Millennials stand accused of immaturity and selfishness, of lacking the grit and commitment to bring up children — who, I gather, get in the way of avocado toast and grapefruit mimosas. The reality is less contemptible and more prosaic: Young people are hesitant to start their families because of legitimate worries about money and stability, along with a variety of cultural concerns that, were their baby boomer parents honest, they would admit issued from their own design.

There are good reasons to wait to have children and good reasons not to; it's that latter notion that I often consider but rarely mention to friends of mine who are on the fence, knowing that they are typically inundated with unsolicited advice from older acquaintances and relatives who all seem to know precisely how to fix this putatively immature, allegedly selfish generation. That kind of scolding about growing up obscures the truest thing about having children, which is that it isn't a chore but a pleasure, not the end of freedom as you know it but the beginning of a kind of liberty you can't imagine.

But before considering the secret lives of young parents, it's useful to establish precisely who they are, and by what measure we can call them *young*.

Millennial women in the United States are waiting longer than any generation in recorded history to have children, a trend that's raised the rate of births among 30-somethings to a 50-year high. They didn't start the trend, but they've taken it to new heights. "While slightly more than half (53 percent) of women in their early 40s in 1994 had become mothers by age 24," one 2018 data analysis published by the Pew Research Center observed, "this share was 39 percent among those who were in this age group in 2014." Yesterday's geriatric is today's "Juno."

Higher education also correlates with relatively delayed birth. A 2012 Pew survey found that while 62 percent of women with a high school diploma had given birth by the age of 25, only 18 percent of women with master's degrees or higher had done the same. In fact, a solid 20 percent of master's degree holders celebrated their first babies at 35 or older. Unsurprisingly, these numbers track with household income. As of 2018, more than half of women living on less than $25,000 per year between the ages of 40 and 45 report having given birth by the age of 25; among women banking $100,000 or more, the share was a touch over 30 percent.

Other factors can play a role, too, like race and country of origin: A 2014 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study noted that white mothers typically gave birth for the first time around age 27 and Black mothers did so at roughly 24.2. Asian and Pacific Islander moms were, on average, over 29, and Mexican-American moms, just under 24.

And then there's geography. Along the East and West Coasts, mothers tend to have their first children later than women in the middle of the country. In Washington, where I had both of my children, mothers on average welcome their firstborn around 28.9; in Tarrant County, Texas, where I was born and raised, the age is closer to 25.7 — only a few months older than I was when my eldest daughter arrived on a dewy morning in June 2016.

Taken together, the trends listed above compose a portrait of millennial delay: Highly educated professionals living in major urban centers — in other words, people like me, a lily-white full-time writer with a master's degree living within rail distance of New York City — tend to postpone childbirth until their late 20s and early 30s. When surveyed, most young people report that they elected to put off having kids because they wanted to make more money first, because of (inter alia) the high cost of child care and the burden of student debt; others cite the price of housing, political instability and fear of a changing climate.

Millennials who had not yet had children and weren't sure if they would told The Times in a 2018 survey that they didn't want to sacrifice leisure time, that they hadn't found the right partner (similar currents seem to underlie the trend of later marriage among younger generations), that they weren't certain they would make good parents.

On the money front, hesitant parents-to-be are exactly right. I would know: While my husband and I were never in abject poverty, we understood what it meant to be precariously employed and at the start of our careers. When I was 25 years old and 20 weeks pregnant, the magazine I wrote for was abruptly put up for sale — the attractive maternity leave policy listed in our contracts included. I wound up interviewing for a series of new jobs wearing an oversize blazer, hoping nobody would detect that I was applying for two. (Reader: Everyone knew.) No career comes without risk, but early career precarity and minimal savings certainly raise the stakes of having kids in one's 20s.

Reasonable concern about having children before establishing oneself could theoretically be remedied with a generous policy approach. The Biden administration has rightly shown some interest in nudging a few such benefits forward. These proposals are nowhere near as luxurious as those on offer in Scandinavia, but they would still be an improvement upon the American situation.

(Naysayers will observe that Nordic welfare wonderlands still sport uninspiring birthrates, to which I would reply that fulsome benefits for families are good regardless of whether they boost birthrates or sand down delays, because the primary beneficiaries of these benefits are, after all, children, and their worth is self-evident.)

But what of having children — or getting married, for that matter — before establishing oneself? That is: What to say to the young person who might consider those kinds of commitments if not for the finality of it all, the sense that she may be making somebody else before knowing who she herself really is? The standard-issue airline safety warning comes to mind: *In the event of an air pressure change inside the cabin, secure your oxygen mask in place before you attempt to assist other passengers you may be traveling with.* They don't say *or you'll both be screwed.* But you know that's what they mean.

The thought certainly crossed my mind. When I got pregnant, my husband was a fledgling lawyer and I was a greenhorn journalist; a big night for us entailed walking to the local Popeyes to pick up a box of biscuits and a couple tubs of red beans and rice. Our basement apartment had orange and yellow walls and a single window-mounted air-conditioner with a permanent death rattle. In my memory it is always summer there, because every day passed with that languor of summer, the thrill of limitless possibility softened by a sense of no particular hurry. We both knew we were still waiting to become who we would be. This was all prelude.

And then we found ourselves in a darkened room in an obstetrician's office, nervously watching an ultrasound flicker to blurry significance on a screen. The doctor pointed out a pale oblong smudge in the black field of my uterus. It looked like the ghost of a peanut. And then he adjusted some knob on the machine, and the wisp had an echoing heartbeat. Somehow, even after the surprise of the pregnancy itself, I still had the capacity to be stunned, and I was.

We spent our first tranche of anxiety on material concerns. Would we need a bigger place, and if so, how would we afford it? How much could we possibly save before D-Day? How would we pay for prenatal care, seeing as I was still on my mother's insurance, which did not cover maternity care for dependents? Our jobs weren't steady. We had no idea when or if they would be, or if either of us was really in the right line of work. Worldly possessions, self-understanding and confidence were all in short supply.

Then she was born.

One of the things they don't tell you about having babies is that you don't ever have *a baby*; you have *your* baby, which is, to you, the ur-baby, the sum of all babies. The moment they laid her damp rosy body on my chest, I knew she would envelop my world. I had worried about that very thing. In Sheila Heti's novel "Motherhood," the narrator, a cynical writer contemplating whether to have kids before it's too late, laments the absence of new parents from their friends' lives, a phenomenon she calls "that relieved and joyful desertion." "When a person has a child," she writes, "they are turned towards their child." The risk of falling off the world haunted me. When you have a baby, you do turn toward your child — that "relieved and joyful desertion" may eventually affect your friends, but it first affects yourself.

What I didn't understand — couldn't have, at the time — was that deserting yourself for another person really *is* a relief. My days began to unfold according to her schedule, that weird rhythm of newborns, and the worries I entertained were better than the ones that came before: more concrete, more vital, less tethered to the claustrophobic confines of my own skull. For this member of a generation famously beset by anxiety, it was a welcome liberation.

Being young, or young enough still not to know yourself entirely, and then feeling the foundation of your nascent selfhood shift beneath you — perhaps that's exactly the sort of momentous change that makes the whole enterprise so daunting. Yet there I've given up the game: With the exception of — perhaps — a few immutable characteristics, *you* are not something you discover one day through trial and error and interior spelunking; you are something that is constantly in the process of becoming, the invention of endless revolutions. You never know who you are, because who you are is always changing.

You catch glimpses of yourself in time, when life shines through your inner world like a prism, illuminating all the sundry colors you contain. It isn't possible to disentangle the light from the color, the discovery of change from the change itself. And I think that's all right. At 25, I nursed my newborn daughter at sunrise in a fifth-story apartment in Washington, dreamily wondering what had become of me, an erstwhile child myself. I searched her beautiful face. It's hard to discern much in their features at that age, young and unformed as they are. But she peered up at me from the shadow of my shoulder, and I could see the umber of my own eyes taking shape in hers. *There I am*, I thought, *there I am*.