

ARTICLE

Dante's *Purgatorio*: Awakening to Self-Becoming

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SUMMARY

Focusing primarily on the nature of the spiritual work performed on Mount Purgatory, this article seeks to honor *Purgatorio*'s focus on personal relationships, demonstrating why it is the most loved section of the *Divine Comedy* according to Dorothy Sayers. Three key scenes (*Purgatorio* II, XX–XXI and XXVII) are examined. In addition, a section of the essay is devoted to an experiential-learning exercise offered to my Dante students in appreciation of the emotional power emitted from Virgil's exit scene. Near the end of the article, a quotation from one of C. S. Lewis' letters serves to clarify the spirit of Beatrice's "tough love" used for Dante's benefit.

KEYWORDS: Beatrice, Casella, Bill Danoff, Dante, David, Harry Chapin, Tom Chapin, John Denver, Sam Keen, Mary, Parenting, Statius, Trajan, Virgil

According to Dorothy Sayers, Dante's *Purgatorio* is the part of the poem that is the least read, but the most loved of the three canticles (9). Dante imagined his Purgatory as a mountain in the southern hemisphere, about three thousand miles high (Sayers 69). And here is how it came to be created: According to the Ptolemaic conception, the earth is at the center of the universe. Dante imagines and writes about hell as a chasm that went to the very center of the earth where he portrays Satan pinned in ice up to his chest. Moreover, Dante imagines that there was only one land mass in the southern hemisphere—and that was Mount Purgatory.

Mount Purgatory was created, according to Dante's poem, when Satan, due to his own arrogant choices, fell to his own demise and struck our planet Earth. At that point, as the land in the southern hemisphere saw Satan falling, it migrated in horror to the north, leaving only a body of water in its wake. When Satan hit the earth, he tunneled a hole, probably in the way a dog digs dirt when it wants to bury something. The displaced dirt eventually piled up in the southern hemisphere and it became Mount Purgatory (*Inferno* XXXIV, 121–24). Dante placed the Garden of Eden at the top of Mount Purgatory (*Purgatorio* XXVIII, 91–96).

The souls whom we find on Mount Purgatory are essentially the people who, now dead, said, "I'm sorry, I realize that I messed up in life." These are the souls who are afforded the opportunity to climb this mountain. This canticle captures the most beautiful part of the story because it reveals the potent connection between beauty and moral growth. The poet's depiction of scaling Mount Purgatory confirms the depth of the Cabby's remarks while listening to Narnia being sung into being, as described in C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*, "I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this" (107).

The first two tercets of *Purgatorio* read as follows:

To course across more kindly waters now / my talent's little vessel lifts her sails, / leaving behind herself a sea so cruel; // And what I sing will be that second kingdom, / in which the human soul is cleansed of sin, / becoming worthy of ascent to Heaven. (I, 1–6)

Dante tells his readers that the folks are on the mountain because they had expressed remorse, thus getting a second chance. During a class discussion, Claire Morton (Bryn Mawr, 2013) made a truly insightful observation, “the people in Purgatory are married to the climb.” In *Purgatorio*, it is as though God were saying that He knows that you are sorry, you are going to do better, but the problem is that you still have habits that need to be corrected. Mount Purgatory functions like a mountain of “spiritual rehab” and discipline, so that the people who are there are working at making themselves spiritually fit and worthy again in God’s eyes.

This mountain truly is a place of spiritual exercise where the souls work hard to be purged of their past sins. Sam Keen wrote a book titled *Beginnings without End*, which is a journal he kept after his divorce. The loaded epigraph is a really simple poem that goes like this:

A year before the outward events / that changed my life I had a dream: / A man walked into my room. He was strong / and beautiful, a seasoned man who had fought / many battles in the dark jungles of the world. / He came over, sat on the edge of my bed, / and said: / “I have learned one important thing in my life— / how to begin again.” (Keen VII)

This epigraph captures powerfully the essence of Mount Purgatory. And this is really what Mount Purgatory is about. It is about people who have made acts of contrition and now are trying to heal themselves. Healing a shattered self requires much effort. Ernest Hemingway writes that we must be “strong at the broken places,” and working towards that kind of strength is part of the goal for the climbers of Mount Purgatory (216).

I remember once, it must have been about fifteen years ago, that I had one of those school days when the kids did not do their homework and so our discussions were sort of flat-lined. Seven hours later, I was still annoyed by the fact that this reading had not been thoroughly completed. For some reason, though, I just could not let it go. That evening, I decided to grab a bite out, still in a foul mood. I met by happenstance a blind gentleman getting out of a car. I held the door open for him, and he asked, “How are you?” Surprising even myself, I blurted out, “I’m doing terribly,” to this stranger whom I’d never met before. The blind gentleman kindly smiled to me, and replied, “Listen, as long as you can see the sky, and you know who you are, it’s always a wonderful day!” Even though I never saw the blind gentleman again, I have taken to heart his mentoring words, and I have been guided by their wisdom many times since. To me, this special moment was almost a “sacramental sign” of what happens on Mount Purgatory. The Purgatorians practice looking up in order to become who they are.

The mountain is pointing upwards, symbolically reminding the reader of Dante’s love for “bow-and-arrow” imagery in the poem (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 16–21; *Paradiso* II, 22–30; XVII, 55–60). One of the meanings of “sin” from the *New Testament*, the Greek word *hamartia* is interpreted as “missing the mark” (Rom. 3:23). Likewise, it is also an archery term. In fact, Dante represents Mount Purgatory as the solid tip of an arrow, pointing upwards. In Italian, the word for “mark”

that Dante often uses is *segno* (*Inferno* XXXII, 133; *Paradiso* I, 126; XXVI, 117) and words are often *sign*-ificant. Jeffrey Schnapp states that even though Hell and Purgatory have a similar shape: Purgatory is solid and substantial, while Hell is an “empty concavity” (92).

As Dante and Virgil exit Hell at the end of the previous canticle, they sigh in big relief from having their dark journey behind them, by finally seeing the sky and the stars (*Inferno* XXXIV, 136–39). After the horror and blackness of Hell at the beginning of *Purgatorio*, Dante gets to see the sky again and he poignantly describes its color in that very early pre-dawn hour as “the gentle hue of oriental sapphire” (I, 13). Did you ever get up really early, just before the sun has broken free of the horizon, and really take in the color of the sky? The experience of witnessing the gift of a brand new day being born is truly a stunning moment which provides us with a kind of supplemental oxygen. That moment does not really take your breath away, rather it actually feeds your breathing. This is exactly what the first view of the sky does for Dante and Virgil: it invigorates them, providing hope for the coming healing hours.

Dante feels hope and energy coming back to him as he absorbs the sky of oriental sapphire and he meets along the shores of Mount Purgatory Cato of Utica (Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis, or Cato the Younger, 95–46 BCE), a Roman man who had committed suicide. Even though not baptized as a Christian and dead by his own hand, he is presented as being the custodian of Mount Purgatory (I, 31–39). This point raises several theological complications in Dante’s story about who gets to make it to heaven and who does not, because part of Dante’s narrative is canonical and follows the teachings of traditional Christianity, but, at the same time, some of what Dante creates in his *Divine Comedy* is not part of the known repertoire. In other words, Dante is simultaneously able to walk within the theological rules, but also breaks them which is a daunting task. And Virgil, Dante’s guide, is now walking in uncharted territory. He remains as Dante’s parent/coach/teacher, but now that they are on Mount Purgatory, the only real thing that Virgil understands and knows is that “upwards” is the way to go, even though Virgil has never been to the Mountain before. Yet, he still guides Dante, even though he feels disoriented and lost himself. His sense of assertiveness changes; he gets really defensive and awkward, and he starts intellectually meandering in a self-justifying and flattering manner (I, 52–84). For the reader, it is really heart wrenching to watch Virgil’s attempts to understand this Christian motif of “repentance for redemption.”

Robert Hollander writes that Virgil’s presence in the story is the tragedy of the *Comedy* (254). Virgil lived an ethical and moral life; however, at the end he did not reap the ultimate fruits of Dante’s Christian vision. Thus, the development of Virgil’s relationship with Dante on Mount Purgatory is fascinating to watch since he has to turn over his slowly declining teacher authority and guidance for the sake of Dante’s own strengthening inner life. The reader is poignantly and painfully aware that every time Dante encounters a Purgatorian, we become one step closer to Virgil’s departure; so, it is really a bittersweet experience.

Dante often makes use of nautical imagery (*Inferno* XXVI, 139; *Purgatorio* I, 1–3, 131). As he gets to the shores of Mount Purgatory (II, 1–9), a boat arrives from the Tiber River (II, 40–42, 100–02), and the people who will climb the mountain disembark. “Ruàch” (רוּחַ, “wind” in Hebrew, Gen. 1:2) propels this ship which is piloted by an angel whose wings fly it (II, 13–47). The vessel goes by the breath, by the spirit, and travels quickly. As the people are dropped off, the boat turns, and heads back for more Purgatorians to deliver them to the mountain’s shore. At the

beginning of *Purgatorio*, even his story functions as a boat, “to course across more kindly waters now / my talent’s little vessel lifts her sails” (I, 1–2); thus, the poem becomes a place of orientation for the reader, a sort of lighthouse as we navigate the *Purgatorio* canticle. The poem is, effectively and concurrently, both a boat and source of light; as the boat appears, Dante recognizes its gradations of light (II, 16–24).

In canto II, Dante and Virgil meet Casella (II, 76) who, while alive, put some of Dante’s poems to music. When Dante and Casella meet in the narrative, it is an endearing encounter because it is like a paradigm of the way Dante has to learn about life and its lessons on Mount Purgatory. They try to hug and Dante goes right through Casella, as Casella’s body is an ethereal “body,” given that he is dead, thus in spirit form, while Dante is still alive and journeying through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise with the weight and physical attributes of a human not yet dead. However, Dante is really eager to hug his acquaintance and he tries three times (II, 76–87). Indeed, it is a lighthearted moment to watch because Dante just keeps clasping each time and, finally, Casella encourages Dante to look at him first. When Dante goes in for a fourth hug, they recognize the futility of their actions and after a friendly reunion, Dante asks Casella to entertain him with a song, for he is tired, needing some restful music (II, 106–17). Is it not human to want to listen to some quiet music at the end of the day, to help us relax? This is especially true for Dante, as he has literally just been through Hell! He has probably at least earned a Harry Chapin-like ballad at this point in the narrative. At this point, Casella begins to sing, and it is a lovely moment, for Dante writes that simply remembering the song, and writing about it in the *Divine Comedy*, instills again its sweetness within him (II, 112–14). Cato reappears, reprimanding the laggard spirits to get to the mountain (II, 118–23). The soul’s task is to not hang out, rather to move upwards. The scene of Cato scolding the souls and setting them straight in their spiritual duties makes the Casella episode memorable and realistic for all who grew up with stern, yet loving, parents.

Dante’s Mount Purgatory is divided into two parts: the lower anti-Purgatory and Purgatory proper, which is located on the top half of the mountain. Anti-Purgatory occupies the first nine cantos of the canticle. Here we meet souls of the people who waited to make their acts of contrition right at the very end of their lives, for their earthly experiences had been preoccupied by worldly “stuff” and concerns. Because during their lives they waited until the last moment to implore for divine forgiveness, their *contrapasso* (i.e. their corresponding righteous punishments, as Dante puts it in *Inferno* XXVIII, 142) is to wait in anti-Purgatory, and they do not get to start climbing the mountain right away. They have to mill around and wait for a period of time defined by divine justice. For instance, excommunicants must wait, according to a mathematical formula of thirty years per every year they were excommunicated (III, 136–41). The other repentant folks will have to wait one year per every year they were alive. This seems to us mortals like a kind of fair penalty: If you were a slug for forty years, therefore you are going to wait for forty years before you get to go through the gate that leads a soul from anti-Purgatory to Purgatory proper. The reader feels bad for these people, particularly if you know exactly what these poor anti-Purgatorians are going through because they *so* badly want to get in the game, but they cannot simply because their coach does not feel they are yet mature enough and ready to play. These souls are “benched,” and a benched kid would give anything to get on the field and start being a team player. However, the kid has long learned that there is no easy prayer from the bench, nor a cunning way to manipulate the coach’s system or his final decision, not even by a tiny tad. All that the repenting souls can do is wait, pray and be patient in the spirit of Mount Purgatory’s system, in order to try

to prove themselves worthy to the coach, and move on a little faster and more productively towards their agonized desire to be “on the field” with the other souls.

It is actually in Purgatory proper (which begins after the end of canto IX) where the real healing work begins. As per *Inferno*, also in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, canto X is considered a canto of “transition,” and Dante has the first of his three dreams on Mount Purgatory (IX, 1–33; XIX, 1–33; XXVII, 94–108). The poignant and timely dream in canto IX has multiple layers of interpretive meanings: Dante dreams that he is grabbed by the talons of an eagle and transported to a sphere of fire, until the sensation of burning wakes him up. The point here is that the pilgrim, even when sleeping, is still learning. I would personally approximate the duration of Dante’s dreams to two-and-a-half hours. His dreams are clearly not just unconscious whims, but rather potent emotional pictures of what is significant during that moment in the pilgrim’s life. These prophetic dreams begin just before dawn, and Dante always sleeps well past sunrise every time he dreams (IX, 13, 43–45; XIX, 1–4, 34–35; XXVII, 91–96, 112–14). In fact, I would encourage everyone to examine the series of illustrations depicting the *Divine Comedy* (they span from sketches to fully developed watercolors) by William Blake, created in his late sixties. Among them is a beautiful depiction of what happened while Dante was asleep, dreaming of the eagle taking him up to the sphere of fire (Bindman 179).

Dante’s patron saint St. Lucia (who, not coincidentally, is also the patron saint of the blind) had come down from heaven and picked up the sleeping Dante and carried him up to the gate that divides anti-Purgatory from Purgatory proper. Blake’s illustration of this episode is bittersweet again because Virgil is seen having to walk behind St. Lucia carrying Dante, while Dante has his head gently nestled onto St. Lucia’s shoulder. It is simply an unbelievably tender representation. Once they arrive at the gate, they realize that there are three steps to negotiate (IX, 91–102), with an angel guarding the entrance. The angel has been charged with clear guidelines as to who should gain entrance to Purgatory proper and who should not. Responsibility of guardianship was established by St. Peter, and the sacred guidelines are: As the guardian, should you err, then do so in keeping the gate open, rather than keeping it locked to the entry of another soul (IX, 127–29). I will return to this point in a moment.

I always have thought that high schools should apply the guidelines that the guardian angel of Purgatory is asked to follow. (As an aside, I have been plagued for years by the question of which pronoun to assign to angels whenever I speak of them with my students. Is it a he/she situation? I’m not entirely sure... That’s a challenging theological question – and I do not wish to “it” the angels and get in trouble!) But to return to the point, I believe that this is indeed the best educational principle for those who are parents and educators. Sometimes kids shut the door and lock it, but as a high school teacher, part of my job is to do my best to keep the doors open for as long as possible, unless they choose to lock them and go another direction. Part of my role is to try to keep opportunities available, just as the angel who is charged with guarding the entrance to the gate of Purgatory proper does. Dante enters the gate, and he is told, echoing the episode with Lot’s wife (Gen. 19:26), not to look back, for he would be pushed outside the gate, only to be stuck in anti-Purgatory again (IX, 130–32).

Beyond the gate, there are seven “terraces” (*gironi*, as Dante defines them in Italian) and they represent the seven capital sins—in order of ascension they are respectively: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lust. Most importantly, the souls who are present on each terrace

are not being punished, but rather, they are learning. To be sure, their curriculum is challenging and often somewhat arduous and uncomfortable. As an example, the prideful sinners (X, 115–20) must balance large and heavy rocks on their backs while moving around their designated terrace (the first terrace, in this case). Surrounding them, on the steep walls of the terrace, are *bas-reliefs* representing humility. Thus, the sinners have models around them of the virtue they aspire to achieve but have not yet cultivated.

By the way, Dante describes these *bas-reliefs* as representations that move—we might call them 3D moving images within a picture frame, to render better Dante’s idea of what the sinners see on the walls of the terrace of the prideful. The term that Dante uses for them is *visibile parlare* (“visible speech,” X, 94–96) because the images in the *bas-reliefs* move and appear to be alive, in a way that, even still today, our art pushes us to be open to new media and new interpretations. As George MacDonald wrote, “The best way with music, I imagine, is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it, but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists” (321–22). By reflecting silently upon the artwork’s inspiration provided for the souls, the noteworthy suggestive force of the 3D images on this first terrace serves to instill in the prideful the habits of humility.

As might be expected, the first of the *bas-reliefs* depicts the story of Mary, the mother of Christ, for certainly in the Catholic tradition she symbolizes the quintessential humble and virtuous person (X, 34–45). The *bas-relief* following Mary’s represents King David, dancing in front of the ark (X, 55–69) as a second example of humility. There are always excellent class discussions with the students about this, in trying to identify the common thread about what actually constitutes humility, for Dante creates the concept as an affirmative quality to strive for, a model to emulate in order for the prideful sinners to raise themselves up towards personal wholeness.

The third *bas-relief* represents an episode in the life of the Emperor Trajan (X, 73–93). As Dante relates in his narrative, a poor, widowed old woman whose son was killed, implores for justice at the feet of the emperor. He responds to her that he is about to go off to war and that he will take care of it upon his return. Worried and concerned, the widow asks about what the outcome for justice might be, should Emperor Trajan never return from the war? Trajan calmly replies to the widow that in this case, his successor will resolve her issue. The widow’s humble yet honest reply is worthy of pause and notice, as she questions the wisdom of delegating imperial duties: “What good can others’ goodness do for you / if you neglect your own?” (X, 88–90). The episode of Trajan and the poor widow in Mount Purgatory shows an *exemplum* of humility, somebody actually telling “truth to power.” The emperor replies to her that she is right and that he will take care of emitting justice in a timely manner as she had requested because “justice asks, so mercy makes me stay” (X, 93). In canto X, the pagan examples of David and Trajan get the most ink. The *bas-reliefs* examples of humility are, in order, from the New Testament, to the Jewish Scriptures, to a pagan, civic story, so that a spectrum of situations is represented on the terrace of the prideful. Furthermore, Dante meets a couple of prideful artists. In order to speak with them, he imitates their gait—Dante becomes like what George Plimpton, in a different context, defines as a “participatory journalist” (4), for Dante is not really doing any purgatorial work himself, but rather he is visiting, observing and learning, so that he can go back to his earthly life and clean up his act. And, just as Dante, so do we, symbolically, when we read the *Divine Comedy*.

An old coaching adage says, “The last guy with the chalk wins,” because whoever gets to draw up the final play, usually wins. Once Dante arrives onto the terrace of the avaricious, he feels an earthquake and learns that one soul has been liberated from his purgatorial work, for this is what happens whenever souls have completed their spiritual learning: the mountain shakes in jubilation for each redeemed soul (XX, 124–44). At this point, all of the souls start to sing a hymn of praise on the mountain before returning to their healing effort. In this case, the earthquake celebrates Statius’ redemption and ultimate freedom from sin (XXI, 67–72). The mountain’s participation in the reclamation of each soul is a deeply ceremonial moment, one echoing St. Paul’s words to the Philippians where people are challenged to secure salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). Dante is surprised and puzzled.

Moving along to canto XXI, Dante talks with Statius, who emphatically professes his respect and admiration for Virgil (91). He is walking nearby Dante, and Statius does not recognize him, since the two had never met while still alive (XXI, 97–102). Statius was what we would probably define today as a “closeted Christian,” i.e., a man who secretly converted to Christianity without openly practicing his faith (XXII, 88–93). Statius tells Dante that he would even be willing to spend another year on the Mountain if only he could have met this poet, Virgil, who had so inspired him that the epic poem *Aeneid* had become a “mother to me, it was nurse” (XXI, 97–102). A number of years ago, Tomas Radowich, a thoughtful student in one of my English literature classes (2006), suggested during a discussion of *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens that “books can serve as surrogate parents.” His comment helps the reader better understand this heartwarming moment in the *Divine Comedy*. In fact, Virgil is standing just a few feet away, listening. Once the nature of the encounter becomes finally clear to Statius, Dante’s smile reminds the reader of a scene near the end of the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*, when the spiritual apprentice/protagonist Ray Kinsella asks a smiling “Shoeless Joe” Jackson, “What are you grinning at, you ghost?” (DVD, scene 33).

Realizing that he is in front of his literary mentor, Statius tries to get down on his knees but Virgil does not let him, explaining that in the eyes of God, all humans are equal (XXI, 130–36). This represents an absolutely fabulous moment of brotherhood, as well as spiritual and intellectual kinship. In truth, it is happening now: We are all walking up the “mountains of learning” and deciding when it is time to move one step further up, each person knowing approximately when a lesson has been learned thoroughly and being ready to explore new segments of knowledge and understanding. It reminds me of a friend of mine in Texas who puts her three-year-old daughter in time out when the girl is having a tough day; her parents put her in her own little space and tell her to come back when she is happy . . . and she does. As human beings, we are capable of assessing where we are on our developing personal/spiritual learning curve and taking the next step when we are ready to. Clearly, Dante insists on affirming the power to claim our own moral authority.

Dante understands that, most of the time, our best growth emerges from the inside out: this trajectory is how Statius explains inner, spiritual liberation working on Mount Purgatory. Dante follows humbly, walking behind his two literary “parents,” Virgil and Statius, listening to their thoughts about poetry (XXII, 127–29). After author Sam Keen came to Gilman School in Baltimore in 1996 to deliver the George E. P. Mountcastle Memorial Lecture, he spoke at length with our Dante students who were stimulated, encouraged and galvanized by his insights on writing and storytelling, and on Dante.

While Keen was the guest of our school for that occasion, I knew how Dante must have felt by tagging along behind two great minds, and just listening to their disquisitions—our dinner party that evening was alive, and truly above my level, yet I knew that I was there for one purpose: to listen to the conversation between Sam Keen and my historian colleague and friend David Neun. As these two men spoke, I realized that I was more like a mere “condiment distributor” at that meal. It was just fine with me that I was being mostly ignored. I knew that I was in a very special moment; I just knew to “shut up and listen,” be quiet and marvel about their wisdom. I like to think that this is how Dante must have felt while climbing Mount Purgatory behind his two key influential guides (XXII, 127–29).

If I share the story of this moment in my life with my own Dante students, it is because I hope they learn to appreciate the responsibilities inherent to claiming authority over their own lives. This power, paradoxically, is grounded in searching for, and looking up to, the wise voices of experience that have come before us. Finally, in canto XXX, Virgil must leave Dante because after having helped him through Hell first, and now almost up all of Mount Purgatory, his parenting role has effectively ended. Virgil will go down the mountain by himself, then climb down the tube-like channel that once had led him and Dante from Lucifer’s body to the shores of Mount Purgatory, and, from there, finally return back to Limbo, alone.

Dante has his last Purgatorial dream, and Virgil delivers his final words to Dante (XXVII). Back in 1995, I began the following yearly practice with my Dante students (it is a voluntary experience, but most students are eager to join): On a Sunday morning, during the second week of November we meet at 4 a.m. in front of the school and, using one of our Gilman mini-buses, I drive them to Sugarloaf Mountain, south of Frederick, MD, about ninety minutes west of Baltimore. Included in their backpacks, each student brings a flashlight, and we climb the mountain while it is still pitch dark (and sometimes there is already snow on the ground). It is always quite cold. We climb to the top, on a winding path. At the top, there is a viewing area from which to watch the sunrise.

Once we reach the outlook point, a beautiful spot on the mountain, students take out their *Purgatorio* texts and we read canto XXVII out loud in the dark by flashlight and sometimes even assisted by the moonlight. As part of this experiential learning, before we commence the climb up Sugarloaf, while still in the parking lot, I play for them a song by Bill Danoff titled “Don’t Look Down.” (For those unaware, Danoff co-wrote “Country Roads” with John Denver.) Part of Danoff’s song goes like this: “Don’t look down / ’cause up is all that matters / . . . even the longest road / must lead to somewhere / even the widest ocean has a shore / even the sky must finally end in Heaven” (Track 10). Once we reach the top, I play them a children’s song by Tom Chapin because I imagine what it must have been like for Virgil to watch Dante sleeping on their final night together on Mount Purgatory. Because Dante’s role in the narrative is that of Virgil’s son, this song is particularly appropriate. This piece encourages a child to “grow in [its] own sweet way.” The song is also about the ritual that parents perform every night to make sure their children are soundly asleep and Chapin’s song is really a beautiful, lovely piece: “The last thing I do each night / before turning out the light / I check on the children as they sleep / peacefully dreaming there, blissfully unaware / of the watch that we keep” (Track 14). Next, we listen to “Bring Him Home” from the *Les Misérables* musical, with Jean Valjean over the body of Marius Pontmercy: “God on high / Hear my prayer / In my need / You have always been there / . . . He’s like the son I might have known / if God had granted me a son. / . . . If I die, let me die / let him live / bring

him home / bring him home / bring him home” (audio CD, no. 2, Track 12). Finally, we listen to an evocative part of the soundtrack from *Field of Dreams*, “The Place Where Dreams Come True,” and we watch the sun come up.

Having returned to the base of the mountain, for breakfast we share a special cake, decorated with each of their names on it, in the colors of their school. As a high school teacher, I experience deeply this precious experiential bonding moment because I have shared the reading out loud of Virgil’s last words where there is an incredibly moving and intimate instance of father-to-son eye contact (XXVII, 124–26). Here they are, father and son, the sun having just broken free of the horizon:

When all the staircase lay beneath us and / we’d reached the highest step, then Virgil set / his eyes insistently on me and said: / “my son, you’ve seen the temporary fire / and the eternal fire; you have reached / the place past which my powers cannot see. / I’ve brought you here through intellect and art; / from now on, let pleasure be your guide; you’re past the steep and past the narrow paths. / Look at the sun that shines upon your brow, / look at the grasses, flowers and the shrubs / born here, spontaneously, of the earth. / Among them, you can rest or walk until / the coming of the glad and lovely eyes— / those eyes that, weeping, sent me to your side. / Await no further word or sign from me: / your will is free, erect, and whole—to act / against that will would be an err: therefore / I now crown and miter you over yourself” (XXVII, 124–42).

These are Virgil’s last words, and they are just precious, poignant, every single time we read them. Virgil stays for a while longer, although he does not say anything else. Beatrice is about to arrive, and Virgil waits until the transition is complete (XXX, 22–57). While Virgil and Dante are watching the pageant in preparation for Beatrice’s appearance, “father” and “son” have this shared look of wonder as they glance towards each other revealing the last glimpse Dante has of Virgil (XXIX, 55–57). This scene strikes me as the most auspicious connection between an adult parent and an adult child. When Beatrice finally appears (XXX, 22–33), Dante turns around to ask an urgent question to Virgil, but he is gone (XXX, 43–54)! Dante weeps and emphatically states that even the pain caused by Eve’s sin was not as bad as Dante’s own grief.

Surprisingly, Beatrice addresses Dante by name (XXX, 55). In fact, this is the only time his name is mentioned in the entire *Divine Comedy*. She orders him to stop crying, to save those tears, for he is going to need them later (XXX, 55–57). Then she chastises him for all his misdeeds (XXX, 55–145). I am reminded of another line from Lewis’ *The Magician’s Nephew*, where it is written that “there are things in life worse than losing a loved one to death” (191), such as perhaps not living authentically our own lives. Beatrice insists that he clarify what the heart of his sin was, even though Dante, at that very moment, was in the midst of his own, deep personal confusion, having just lost his “adoptive father.”

On the subject of grief and loss of a loved one, one might remember the strong connection between C. S. Lewis and a student of his Sheldon Vanauken. When Vanauken’s wife, Jean, died, he and Lewis exchanged some correspondence discussing grief. Vanauken wrote Lewis explaining how his and Jean’s love was more unique than any love imaginable. They had defined it as the “shining barrier,” whereby nothing could ever get in between their love, which had no room for anything else: they were not looking together in the same direction, but rather, they were only

looking at each other. Lewis responded to him with an amazing letter, telling him how sorry he was for his friend's loss but that Vanauken did not understand love correctly and that he was not "cutting the wood of life according to the grain" (Lewis, *Letters*, 605–06). Lewis added, in a Beatrice-like moment, that if Vanauken could believe him, that his words were "the strongest proof of my belief in you and love for you" because it is only "to fools and weaklings one writes soft things" (605–06).

Baby boomers will remember Dan Fogelberg, the folk musician, who has a wonderful song called "The Leader of the Band." In that song he shares his "father's means of discipline which took [him] years to understand," for he said it was like a "thundering velvet hand." This dynamic captures very well the spirit of Beatrice's care for Dante because she loves him so much that she is going to insist that he wake up and understand what it takes to be a worthy, spiritual child of God—play time and confusion time are now over!

Inferno is about self-justification. I encourage everyone to read Dante's *Purgatorio* because it is about self-becoming.

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