

## Remembering Jean Bethke Elshtain

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 14, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

Jean Bethke Elshtain died Monday. She will be greatly, and deeply, missed. The two adverbs are not reducible one to the other, which is something Elshtain helped teach me and others: There is a depth and density to human life that too many thinkers ignore in their abstract ratiocinations. I suspect it was this attention to the embodied quality of human life that really drew Elshtain to Augustine and I know it was what first drew me to Elshtain.

In the summer or early autumn of 1996, I picked up a copy of Elshtain's book *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*. It is one of the special graces of being a reader that you get to know people through their books. I remember Msgr. John Tracy Ellis saying that, apart from the Master and his mother, the person who had exercised the greatest effects on his thinking was Cardinal John Henry Newman whom, of course, Ellis had never met. Elshtain's book framed issues I had been uncritically ruminating about for some time: Six years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the *End of History*, there remained an ennui about the West's political life, and she held up that ennui in the mirror of Augustine's works.

Here is one passage from the book that captures her at her best:

*False pride, pride that turns on the presumption that we are the sole and only ground of our own being; denying our birth from the body of a woman; denying our utter dependence on her and others to nurture and tend to us; denying our continuing dependence on friends and family to sustain us; denying our dependence on our Maker to guide and to shape our destinies, here and in that life in the City of God for which Augustine so ardently yearned, is, then, the name Augustine gives to a particular form of corruption and human deformation. Pridefulness denies our multiple and manifold dependencies and would have us believe that human beings can be masters of their fates, or Masters of the Universe as currently popular super-heroes are named?. Every proud man heeds himself, and he who pleases himself seems great to himself. But he who pleases himself pleases a fool, for he himself is a fool when he is pleasing to himself,? Augustine writes.*

And, Elshtain wrote those words before Ron Paul even considered running for president and before Paul Ryan made his congressional staff read *Atlas Shrugged*.

Here is another passage that captures Elshtain's deep understanding of Augustine and why he remains so necessary a guide, as well as the easy way she catalogues her own intellectual development:

*We moderns tend to presuppose a free-standing individual and then to posit a state that we call sovereign. What connects the individual to the state is a series of reciprocal rights and obligations. The state in the senior partner, of course, and can, if it desires, call most of the shots. The individual can proclaim rights but also has obligations. There isn't very much in-between. We know, of course, that there is lots of other stuff, but it goes unmentioned, untheorized, if you will.*

*Moving through the City of God with this myth of the individual and the state in my mind, but lodged there quite insecurely because I never quite got it ? this story of the self and the state, for the world was so much denser, thicker, richer, and more complex than social contract metaphors and tales of rights and obligations allowed ?*

*I took up the distinction between the household and the polis, or the private and the public, because Aristotle had put that on the agenda explicitly and because feminists were vigorously proclaiming that the 'private was the public,' tout court, and that didn't seem quite right to me either.*

Denser, thicker, richer, and more complex ? are these not the qualities that ideologues in every age miss or minimize?

I wonder if the book would have made such an impression on me if it had not been an election year. But, it was an election year and a Bill Clinton election year meaning that politics was presented as the be all and end all of human existence, confidence was brimming, there was nothing we couldn't do, blah-blah-blah. After the election, the President and his senior staff were going on a retreat for a few days to decompress from the stresses of the campaign and to plan the second term. George Stephanopoulos came into Kramerbooks, where I was then working, and asked for some reading recommendations. I rushed over to the philosophy shelf, picked up a copy of Elshtain's book and told him: 'Having just won a landslide political victory, this is a book you MUST read.' When he came back from the break, he told me that one day he had gone out for a walk and when he returned to his hotel room, Elshtain's book was gone and a note was on the counter: 'Borrowed the Augustine book ? it looks interesting. Bill.' A few weeks later, President Clinton held his first post-election press conference during which he mentioned the word 'purgatory.' I thought to myself: 'It took!' A few more weeks later, the world was introduced to Ms. Lewinsky and we realized it did not take.

A few years later, I had the good fortune to meet Jean Bethke Elshtain. She joined Cardinal Francis George and Paul Griffiths on a panel I helped arrange to discuss Leon Wieseltier's book 'Kaddish.' She was as vivacious in person as she was on the page. I shall treasure the memory of that evening for a long time.

At the beginning of 'Augustine and the Limits of Politics,' Elshtain writes about her religious identity:

*As I struggled with belief and unbelief, faith and skepticism, abandoning (so I then thought) my Lutheran beliefs and identity, I found I could not bid Augustine adieu. For one thing, I had only just become acquainted with him during the period of time when I had begun to put myself through the ordeals of relentless interrogation of that past which was my own.*

*Convinced that I had left behind me once and for all Wittenberg and its general environs, I discovered, much to my surprise, that the rocky road I was traveling seemed to be heading south, in the general direction of Rome. How could that be? If Enlightenment was supposed to succeed, even defeat Faith, shouldn't I be pointed north to Konisberg or west toward Paris? I took an intensive crash course on Kant, and then another, but I emerged not only unconvinced but unmoved. The air seemed awfully thin up there. And the Cartesian cogito made no sense to me at all. Having had polio as a child and given birth to my own first child at age nineteen, bodies loomed rather large in my scheme of things.*

Elshtain's body will now be returned to the earth. Her soul goes to meet her Maker as a Catholic. She completed the trek to Rome and was received into the Church in 2011. Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord. She helpfully, and persistently, made our modern minds restless by reminding us with her beloved Augustine, that it is the restfulness of the heart that is the true aim of the human journey.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/20/2017 - 23:56):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/remembering-jean-bethke-elshtain>