

Breaking Up With Jesus

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To my roommates

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Whether they want to be held responsible or not, these people made this book possible:

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Dictionary of terms:

- **Agnostic:** the term that means one should not profess to a belief in something that cannot be proven¹ (Snider).
- **Churchianity:** Church culture that is so well preserved, it may as well be part of the faith. Examples: racial segregation of churches, discouragement of women in leadership roles, preserving tradition
- **De-conversion:** Going from being a Christian to something else.
John: Are you a Christian?
Ashley: I used to be before I de-converted. Now I'm an atheist.
- **Detox:** The process of religion leaving your system, much like the affect of drugs wearing off an addict
- **Exian-** Ex-Christian
- **Fundy:** short for "Fundamentalist"
- **Fundamentalist:** basically, a strict Christian.

¹ A really interesting factoid about how that term was coined: "Huxley got the term "gnostic" from the early Christian Gnostics, whom he said, "professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant", and created the word 'agnostic', with the prefix giving the new word the opposite meaning of the core word, which means, "knowing". "(Snider)

- *Xian*: Christian. Sometimes spelled “Xtian”
- *The Church*: I use this term to mean modern church culture including the thoughts and behavior of clergy, church members, and denominational leaders.

Example: “*The church* uses fear as a manipulative tool.”

- *LGBT*: An acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

I woke up to an empty room

No more angels watching over me.

No more demons to be held at bay

by the invocation of
an Anglicized version
of a Hellenized version
of a Hebrew name

I woke up to an empty room:

Just a room. Four walls, ceiling, floor.

Just a room. Nothing more.

I woke up to an empty room

and embraced the solid air.

I woke up to an empty room and knew myself

awake.

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(Losing My Religion)

1

The Break-Up

Emerging from the constraints of religion is like coming out of a bad relationship. You're breaking up with Jesus, so to speak, and as such, it's totally normal to experience the same roller coaster emotions you had after a jerk broke your heart in high school.

There's:

- Anger: "How could they treat me that way?" "How could I LET them treat me that way?"
- Denial: "This isn't happening. I will wake up tomorrow and everything will be back to normal."

- Self-blame: "Maybe if I had tried harder, this would have worked.'
- Fear of the future: "What will I do now?" This person was my life, my everything! I don't know who I am anymore without them."

[Enter Identity Crisis]

Of course you don't HAVE to experience all of these feelings, everyone is different, but if you do, take comfort. You are not crazy and you are not alone. Many of us have experienced the same thing and come through just fine.

Different, but just fine.

I know the future may look scary right now. Depending on how long you were a Christian, this could mean a whole new way of living. You'll have to figure out who you really are without all the pressure to conform to spiritual ideals.

When I moved back home from a Christian college, I was not only switching locations and leaving friends, but I was, in a sense, leaving myself behind as well. The girl who lived in guilt and constantly did a whole list of things to "please God", was gone. It was time to discover who I really was.

Initially, I felt like a rug had been ripped out

from underneath me, but in time, I discovered the freedom that comes with making my own decisions. I was no longer afraid of what people thought of me! Before, I would have found a new group of Christians and try to fit in with them, but now I suddenly had the freedom to choose my friends without putting them in categories.

In youth group, I learned that there are two kinds of people in the world: "saved" and "lost", and I should be spending as little time as possible with those in the second category. In my new life with no constricting beliefs, people are just people. I love the freedom in hanging out with anyone and everyone, learning from their diverse experiences and growing as a person. So, even though your future might be a blank slate right now, you can have a lot of fun filling it up! It may just take time.

Throughout this book, I will use examples from my own journey out of Christianity; sometimes I will do this by including related journal entries I wrote during that time. To give you a point of reference, I'll give you the short version now and fill in the gaps in later chapters.

I was the poster child for Christianity for most of my life. From kindergarten through twelfth grade, I attended a Christian school, where I memorized scripture, helped lead a Christian club that met before school and helped lead worship at our weekly chapel service.² I was active in church and firmly believed that God had called me to full-time ministry.

After high school graduation, I moved to Texas to attend a Christian university, which, for the rest of the book, I will refer to as CU. This is where it all began. After three semesters, I had seen so much corruption in “the great institution of Christianity” it made me sick. The experience was, for the most part, a nightmare for my family and me. Before starting my second year, I slipped away quietly and moved closer to home to continue my education at a state university. Starting that summer, it took a year for my faith to completely dissolve.

I have asked myself many times over the course of this last year “Why is it that I lost my faith and people in my same situation went on believing?” The best answer I have is the one I read in a news story tonight about a reporter who lost his faith (Lobdell). He

² Is this starting to sound like a resume yet?

explained it this way: every Christian eventually comes to a place in his life where he has no reason at all to continue his beliefs. Maybe it's a tragedy, an intellectual question, or something else entirely that challenges his faith, but somehow a roadblock is in his path and he has to make a decision. Option one: Continue on in blind faith or option two: Give up on Christianity and find something more believable.

This book is for those of us who have chosen option two. Our decision doesn't make us any better or worse than the option one people; it just means we have chosen a different life path than they have.

You have your own story, and it may not look a thing like mine, but we have a lot in common. We put our faith in something and we were let down. No matter how long or deep your Christian experience was, the process of leaving can be traumatic. There are not many resources out there for people in our situation, so I took it upon myself to create this handbook to address the needs, fears, and challenges we Ex-Christians face.

Let me clarify here and now that the purpose of this book is not to convince Christians to give up their faith. There are plenty of books in that category already. This is a guidebook for those who once considered

themselves Christians, but now, for whatever reason, they no longer hold those beliefs and they wish to cross over to a new way of life.

This book is meant to be like a friend to you; a friend who supports you no matter what, understands what you are going through, and makes you laugh when you take yourself too seriously. No matter how long, short, rough, or rocky your journey, remember that we are in this together. My hope is that within these pages, you find the strength and hope to thrive in this new season of life.

2

Detox: This Is Not the Fun Part

Detox, in a word, sucks. In drug rehab, it's the stage where a patient is no longer ingesting the drugs he has been regularly using and his body, emotions and mind are desperate for those chemicals. A drug addict's body starts to freak out when it suddenly doesn't have the chemicals it has become accustomed to. This is never pleasant. You see this on a small scale when a smoker gets irritable while withdrawing from cigarettes. Irritability, shaking, and headaches, are all possible side effects of the body withdrawing from nicotine.

I use the word “Detox” to describe what someone goes through when transitioning away from Christianity. It’s a painful, scary time that feels like it will never end. As much as you want it to be over NOW, or find a way to bypass these horrible emotions, I’m sorry to tell you that it does get worse before it gets better. I am sure this is a little different for each Ex-Christian, but some effects are widely experienced. Fear of hell is at the top of the list.

When I was a fundy, I accepted as truth that everyone who does not “trust Jesus as his Lord and Savior” goes straight to hell forever upon dying. You probably believed this, too. It’s only natural, then, for you to think, “Does this mean I’m going to hell? Am I one of *the lost*??” If you find yourself worrying about going to hell or having nightmares about it, it’s not just you. It happens to a lot of us.

For me, this is something that has gotten better with time. When I first started questioning my faith, it was all so scary, like being lost in the woods. Sometimes I wanted to die, but fear of hell kept me from it, so I guess there was an upside to this experience! I don’t have a simple formula for how to deal with the fear of hell. Life isn’t as simple as I once thought it was. But I

will tell you that this is something nearly everyone deals with and I think that as you formulate your new beliefs and become surer of yourself, this fear will gradually disappear. At least that's how it worked for me.³

I still remember the night when I first began to feel happy again. It was Halloween, and I had attended an artsy talent show on campus where the tables were decorated with carved pumpkins and candles. Afterwards, the emcee encouraged us all to take a pumpkin home with us because otherwise, they would get thrown away. A guy standing near me commented that it would be fun to take them outside and smash them. "Yeah, that would be fun!" I said, "You want to?" He grinned and said he would. It was raining lightly when we sneaked our pumpkins across the street to a parking lot and had fun smashing them. When our fun was over and the pumpkins that once decorated tables lay splattered in a hundred pieces on the asphalt, we called it a night.

That night was the first time I cut loose and had a good time after my initial loss of faith. It may sound silly to say smashing vegetables gave me hope again,

³ The funny thing is I worried more about going to hell when I was a Christian! I don't really believe in hell anymore and I'm much happier for it.

but when you've spent months agonizing over such a significant personal loss, the little things can bring you great joy!

Another horror of detox I experienced was the rules lingering in my head. As an Xian, every moment of my day was governed by rules. "Don't wear short skirts, don't do anything that might upset somebody, read your Bible, pray, witness, don't be friends with unbelievers." Even as my beliefs changed, those little reminders still interrupted my thoughts constantly, like those god-awful internet pop-up ads that say something like "Slap the monkey!!" in big, yellow letters. It annoyed the crap out of me! I was accustomed to living a life of perpetual guilt, so the transition to living without that burden took time. Some days I still don't think I'm there yet! Those annoying religious pop-ups haven't gone away, but over time they have gotten quieter, and easier to ignore. I have found that the more that I do what I want and trust my judgment, the dimmer those reminders get. Remember, what you feed grows; what you starve dies. That's one of the few truths I was taught during my sentence at CU.

Within the first few weeks of losing my faith, detox hit me literally right in the gut. I noticed it when I

was browsing a bookstore with my friends, floating from section to section. Whenever I started to enter the “Religion” section, my stomach felt sick. It was the same with praying. Because prayer had been a habit for years, I still began praying automatically many times a day, but during this time, I couldn’t so much as say “Dear God” without feeling sick. It was like a gag reflex. I don’t remember being able to do anything spiritual during that time without feeling physically sick. I was literally sick of religion! Of course, this made perfect sense seeing that I had recently been through a horrible ordeal at CU and loathed anything to do with God. I don’t remember exactly when the sickness subsided, but I don’t think it lasted any more than a few weeks.

The following is a journal entry I made while discovering detox:

I learned a new term last night: detox. Well, at least I heard it used in a different way.

On exchristian.org, one post was by a person who talked about her journey away from Christianity. She said even though she left, she is still "detoxing", which means she still experiences emotional mess that

comes with spending years trying to be accepted by God.

I thought I was done detoxing, but I found out today that I'm not. I'm convinced that there are some very interesting similarities between drug detox and Churchianity detox. Withdrawals, flashbacks, triggers, the whole bit.

In the last 24 hours I've experienced enough irrational guilt to last me the whole year. Geez, yesterday was the first time in a LONG time that I said, "I can't wait for church tomorrow." And then I spend the morning and afternoon in the torture of "detox."

If you're unfamiliar with Christian detox, here is a non-comprehensive list of symptoms:

Intense guilt over anything you could have possibly done wrong in the last 20 years (or more, depending on your age), exhaustion, being disconnected from reality (like putting your keys in the fridge, or forgetting something you never forget) ignoring or over-indulging bodily needs like sleep, food, water, etc., withdrawal from friends/family, feelings of hopelessness, taking more medicine than usual.

I have a life to get back to that includes studying for a test and going to dinner tonight, which means I

knew I had to snap out of it. So I got dead-level honest with God and told Him "I hate you, I'm sick of this and I'm not doing it anymore! (Plus a bunch of profanity I won't bother repeating.) No human being should have to go through this and I'm through with trying to please you because I don't think that's possible."

I feel much better and I'm going to go to dinner now. This whole experience opened a lot of questions for me and I want to find answers.

In the above entry, I defined Christian Detox, even though I was not aware of it at the time. The best definition I know of is "the emotional mess that comes with spending years trying to be accepted by God." I know how that feels. It's been a while since I have let myself think about the mental torture I went through as a Christian trying to please a god who was never satisfied. I don't think about it very often because the emotions associated with remembering are enough to make you sick. Many of you will be able to relate to this example:

Like any other kid in the middle of adolescence, sexual discovery was at the forefront of my mind, but the church presented sexuality as a bad thing. Therefore, I was in the middle of a conflict that I have since discovered is very common for "youth group kids." It's

the conflict of natural curiosity and sexual exploration versus Pastor Tim who says, “Don’t have sex! Sex is bad! Don’t even think about it!” That conflict can cause a lot of unnecessary stress for a teenager who desperately wants to please God because it is virtually impossible to ignore your sexuality at that age. I went through a lot of unnecessary shit because of it. By the age of fourteen, I had resorted to self-injury (most people call it “cutting”) as a means of dealing with the guilt and shame I was experiencing. I was so addicted to this form of stress relief, that it took a year to quit.

If you are leaving Christianity, chances are you are leaving with scars. I have read many testimonies by Ex-Christians who hit rock bottom before they decided to leave. Some considered suicide when they discovered they were gay. Some trusted God for a miracle that never happened. If you bear scars inflicted by Christianity, I want you to know, first of all, that you are not alone. Secondly, it will not always hurt as much as it does now. As I mentioned before, detox sucks. You are experiencing a wide range of emotions at once and it’s a lot to deal with, but it won’t last forever.

Even after going through the initial horror of detox, I still relapse on occasion. Perfectionism dies

hard, and my god, some days it's like trying to kill a bear with a plastic spoon. If you suffered from spiritual perfectionism, I totally understand because I had it bad. How do you know if you had it bad? Just answer these questions:

Have you ever:

- Analyzed whether littering is a sin?
- Silently disapproved of church attendees who don't take sermon notes?
- Questioned the salvation of parishioners who sit on the back pew?
- Repented for using a euphemism (ex. "Oh my gosh!")⁴?
- Thrown out a movie/music album because it contained one swear word?

Don't worry if your obsessing doesn't go away instantly. Like everything else mentioned in this book, spiritual perfectionism takes time to wear off, which leads us into our next chapter...

⁴ Believe it or not, I've actually heard a sermon on why we shouldn't use euphemisms for "god".

Welcome To Your New Life!

I recently took a survey on an Ex-Christian forum, asking the members what the easiest part of leaving their faith was (Live Journal).

The most prevalent response was “not living in fear anymore” and “not feeling guilty.”

Aside from detox, my new lifestyle is much less depressing than my former one as a believer. Take, for instance, the guilt trips. Christian culture teaches that you should constantly feel guilty about something, such as not witnessing enough, not praying enough, not fasting enough, not reading your Bible enough, etc.

Then, besides the sin of omission, there's also guilt about things you actually *do*. Example: How many of you were in youth group during puberty? Yes, I see those hands; you may put them down now. As a result, how many of you lived in guilt because you thought it was a sin to think about sex? Ah, hands going up all across the room. If I had been Catholic, I would have spent my entire eighth grade year in confessional, pleading guilty to *gasp* normal adolescence! I wonder how many Hail Mary's it takes to absolve masturbation...

Church was a perpetual guilt trip. I've heard quite a few sermons about sin, and chances are you have too.

Here's a familiar one-

"Everyone take a piece of paper and write down a sin you are struggling with, then come up front and nail it to this wooden cross." I'm not just picking on the 'costals for that one; it's cross denominational (no pun intended). I'm sure there were many illustrations about sin I missed out on, but the point is, we were constantly focusing on sin. Think about your sin, pray about your sin and write about your sin. And if you live pretty tamely, find something, anything, to repent of. The sin

of worry, gluttony, goofing off in class, not practicing your clarinet, or if nothing else, the sin of *not being perfect*.

A blog entry from when I started discovering a guilt-free life:

*I went and hung out with my guy friends last night. My, how people change. A little over a year ago, I probably would have thought it was horribly wrong to go to an all-guys dorm, hang out with guys with the door closed and watch a cartoon show that *gasp* had actual cuss words in it! I think I used to think everything was a sin. People change though.*

I take great pleasure in telling you that your days of perpetual guilt are over if you want them to be. Of course, your initial period of detox may involve a lot of guilt-I know mine did-but that doesn't last forever. Now I'm at the point where I only feel guilty when I actually do something wrong, as opposed to imagining things I might have done wrong that I need to repent for.

It feels really good to curse now and then without feeling badly about it. I restrain myself in settings where it wouldn't be appropriate (teaching school, around religious people, or in any kind of formal environment). I guess one good thing about growing up

Christian is that it doesn't take much for me to feel satisfied in my rebellion. Some people choose to rebel against their upbringing with drinking and drugs; all it takes for me is buying gay-themed books, cursing, and wearing clothes that actually identify me as a female. This is just *too* easy! I wore my first halter top this summer and I must say I looked *good* in it! I think every woman should have the right to look in the mirror and think, "Damn! I look sexy!"

Of course, some things didn't change. I'm comfortable around social drinking, but I don't enjoy being around drunk people (as a result, I don't go to college parties!). Never have and probably never will. I still have no desire to smoke cigarettes because I like to take care of myself. Some people are different though.

When my friend Dave went through his Ex-Christian rebellion phase, he partied every weekend, and I didn't judge him for that. I have known Dave for a long time and I knew that he needed that wild time in his otherwise very responsible life to "get it out of his system." He didn't drink and drive and I knew that his fun weekends wouldn't lead to anything serious like alcoholism, so I didn't worry about him. After a while,

he decided on his own that he was through partying and returned to a more toned-down lifestyle.

I used to believe that non-Christians had no moral compass to guide their decisions, but that is *not true*. When I de-converted, I did not suddenly get the urge to go on a killing spree, use drugs, or even exceed the speed limit. It's kind of a letdown when you think about it!

Now, instead of using the Bible to tell me what to do and how to live, I think about the consequences of my actions to determine if I should do it or not. If it could hurt me or someone else, I know I shouldn't do it. It's quite simple, really. I expected decision-making to be harder!

This is a far cry from what I was taught about waiting on God to reveal his will. You may know it as the Open Door Theory, which states that if an opportunity lands on your doorstep, that's God's way of saying you should do it, but if you experience setbacks while pursuing a goal, then that's God's way of saying you shouldn't pursue it. A friend of mine had this to say on the subject:

I think one of the most-preached sermons I heard when I was growing up revolved around some aspect of

the "open door" theory, as I like to call it. According to this theory, God shows you His will by either opening or closing doors. If the door is open, then you're supposed to go wherever it leads you. If you're trying to go somewhere, and the door closes, then you obviously weren't meant to do that in the first place.

Well what if there are no open doors? Or what if the door's closed but you're supposed to open it? And what about those cracked doors...is that some kind of temptation, or am I supposed to open it? Oh, yeah, and what if that famed "open door" leads you right off a cliff? What? Is that OK because the door was open? I'm sorry but I don't really like that option.

I have yet to find an obviously open door. Or even a closed door for that matter. Yeah, there are things that are just off-limits, but in my opinion, they're all cracked. The open door theory...not so great.

All right, it's time to make this book useful. Get a pen and paper and make a list of things you've always wanted to do, but couldn't because you believed it was a sin (or because God didn't "open the door"). Depending on what persuasion of belief you were, this list could have a wide range of items. Here are some mild ideas to get you started:

1. Going to a movie theater⁵
2. Drinking caffeine⁶
3. Taking a Tylenol⁷
4. Watching an R-rated movie
5. Wearing midriff-baring clothing
6. Dancing⁸
7. Listening to rap music

If you're feeling slightly more ambitious:

1. Get a piercing
2. Get a tattoo
3. Dye your hair a florescent color and shave it into a Mohawk
4. Go to a bar. When you order your drink, use cool phrases like “dirty” and “on the rocks”, just like in the movies. Drink the whole thing down in one shot, and slam the glass down on the

⁵ Who else has heard the “what if Jesus comes back while you’re in that theater?” speech?

⁶ Anything is possible with churchianity

⁷ What! You don’t believe God can heal your headache? Bring out the anointing oil!

⁸ Most churches frown on pre-marital sex. Why? Because it might lead to dancing. (insert laughter)

bar for a big finish. Oh yeah. You are *bad* now!

And for the finale (but only if you are brave):

1. Vote for a Democrat⁹

Now, make up your mind to go do an item on your list.

Besides freedom from perpetual guilt, another bonus I experienced after de-converting is a heightened respect for others. I used to think that we as Christians were superior to all other people because we were the special “children of God”; everyone else was lumped into a category called “the lost.” Any relationships I had with non-Christians were pretty much just a formality. It was all a part of “relationship evangelism”, which I think is one of the sickest, most twisted teachings I learned in church. For those of you who were spared this appalling teaching, I will explain.

Relationship Evangelism is when a Christian forms a relationship with an unbeliever for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. Pretty sick, huh? How would you like it if you found out that the only reason someone is your friend is because they want to

⁹ Democrats were practically demonized by our Christian leaders.

sell you something? Exactly. Sometimes it's called "reaching people", but it should be called "**lying**." You pretend to be interested in someone for who they are, but all you really care about is getting them to "make a decision for Christ." We were all cautioned not to get too close to these non-Christians. (Why? Isn't it kind of cultish to encourage separation from the general population?) Because I believed so whole-heartedly in this practice, I was condescending towards non-Christians, and didn't value them just for who they were. *Sigh*, thank goodness those days are over! This blog entry shows how I went through that process:

*I realized something today. Since this whole fallout with God, my life isn't sectioned off anymore. I don't have my "church" friends, my "Unsaved friends" and my "Saved but un-churched friends", etc. I haven't made it a point to ask any of the people I hang out with about their spiritual beliefs, so now everyone is in one category: friends. Likewise I haven't talked to most of them about my spiritual beliefs (mostly since they're so fuzzy right now). And I like it that way, and I don't want to ever change that. It's nice to be someone's friend **without having an agenda***

To me, people are just people, and I do not much care about their religion. Giving up my beliefs put me on a regular playing field with everybody else and helped me realize that everyone is equal. Now that I *am* a non-Christian, socializing is much easier because I am no longer trying to sell Jesus. I just get to be myself! In the process, I have made many new, amazing friends that I never would have gotten to know before. I'm learning that humanity has so much more in common than I ever knew. Everyone makes mistakes, everyone has dreams, and no one has all the answers.

Going To Your Own Funeral

I have found that grieving the loss of my faith feels the same as when I grieve the loss of a friend. If you have found this to be true for yourself, don't be embarrassed about it. Of course you are going to grieve when you lose something very important to you whether it is a person, a pet, a job, a home or a belief system. After any loss, there's a hole in your life where something you loved used to be and it hurts knowing it's not there.

How many times after my friend Claire died did I pick up the phone to call her, only to remember that there was no one there to answer? Every time I remembered, it hurt all over again.

When I hear the song “My Girl” on the radio, it makes me sad because that was Gracie’s trademark song. She committed suicide several years ago.

Little reminders like that have the power to prick your heart and stir up emotion even after you thought you had finished grieving. Just when you think you’ve moved on, an event can trigger a memory of your loss, and you can feel crappy all over again. To this day, I don’t like to drive past my old church because just seeing it puts me in a bad mood. There’s no time limit set on the grieving process. It’s different for everyone, but as a counselor once told me, “It will last longer than you want it to.”

You may be wondering: Why does this hurt so much? Why is my heart hurting over this faith stuff like it does when a friend dies? Because, dear reader, someone has died: the person you used to be.

There are supposed to be five stages of grieving. (Padula) It might look something like this when you lose your faith: (Disclaimer: This is just an outline. You may experience these stages in a different order, or perhaps you will not experience all five stages)

- Denial: “This is probably just a phase. What was I thinking? Of course I believe in Jesus!”
- Anger- “I hate everyone who taught me this crap! I hate god, I hate church, and I hate feeling like this!”

Blog example:

I'm still dealing with anger and bitterness. This morning I was like, "God, I am mad as hell." It's not a phrase I would say in front of my parents but it's perfectly descriptive in a way that "heck" just isn't.

And you know what? I'm not going through crap, I'm going through....ok I won't finish that because I don't think I have to.

Anger is such a normal part of grief that I dedicated a whole chapter to it. Irish blood runs through my veins so you'd better believe I know something about anger!

- Bargaining: “If God sends me a sign, then I will believe!”
- Depression: “Without my faith, life has no meaning. I feel empty and lost. What’s the point in going on?”

- Acceptance: “My life is different now, but I am happy. I have found meaning and purpose in other things.”

Change is inevitable and necessary for survival. Just as our earth has changing seasons, so do our lives. When companies, schools, institutions, or whatever dig their heels in and refuse to change, they sign their own death certificate. We've all seen it happen. And I'd much rather live differently than stop living at all. When it's all said and done, I'm thankful for change.

When I lost my faith, I lost a lot, including my plans for the future. It was shock to my system when I realized that my plans of being a missionary weren't going to happen. I had to figure out what I wanted to do with my life! After seven years of looking forward to a career in full-time ministry, I really had to switch gears! When I first had this realization, the only thing I knew was I did not want to continue my education at a Christian college. That was it. I had no idea where I would go or what I would major in when I got there. If you had asked me any question about my life at that point, I would have answered, “I don't know.”

Along with losing a career in ministry, it has recently occurred to me that I don't know what kind of family I want to have someday. It used to be so simple:

Step 1: Find a man who loves Jesus and doesn't mind living overseas.

Step 2: Have 2.5 children and raise them in a Christian home

Step 3: That's as far as I got

I think most girls have a checklist in their mind of the qualities they want in a companion. I don't have one of those lists, but I'm sure I can find one on the internet somewhere.

That's just one more area of life I'm no longer sure about. Once upon a time, I wanted to date a Christian guy, but now I don't think any Christian guy would want me since we would be "unequally yoked." He would have to be a very open-minded Christian, because I don't want anyone "missionary dating" me. The open-minded Christian is an endangered species though, so if you meet one, send him my way! Anyway, I guess it doesn't really matter what I want in a guy because no one is currently asking me out. That's a depressing subject for another chapter. I think I'll call it: "You're perfect! I love you! You must be gay!"

5

Anger

First of all: forget everything your church taught you about anger.

If your experience was with a Bible-thumping fundamentalist¹⁰ church, you were probably taught that anger should be diffused as soon as possible. Let me re-educate you. Anger is a natural response to fear and hurt. It is not only natural but it is *okay* to go through a period of anger while you are leaving your beliefs. I remember feeling really angry with everyone who taught me to believe in the Christian faith. My ex-

¹⁰ Why does that word start with “fun”?

pastor, Sunday school teachers, Bible college teachers, Christian school teachers and anyone else who helped indoctrinate me were the targets of my anger.

And why shouldn't I have been angry? I was realizing that everything I had been taught was a lie! Was I supposed to feel good about that? No, I wasn't and you shouldn't expect to go through this process without some level of anger either. Losing faith is like losing a loved one and the grief process is very similar. Remember learning about the five stages of grief? One of the first stages of grief is anger, so rest assured, feeling angry is natural.

Don't feel like you have to squash your anger overnight. Like the common cold, it just has to run its course and the better you take care of yourself while it's happening, the better it will go for you. It helps to have someone to vent to, as illustrated by this blog entry I wrote:

I call this the Anger Phase. I remember lying on the floor telling my roommate that I hated God, Christians, the church as a whole, Bible college...everything. I felt like all the time I had spent serving God had been a complete waste. All the way back to my childhood. This whole thing was a lie. It

certainly wasn't God who told me to go to that dreadful college, I thought. I don't know God and apparently I never did. Maybe God doesn't even exist.

... I remember that for a while the only thing I had to say when I did pray was, "I hate you. That's how I feel and that's really all I have to say."

I cannot overemphasize how thankful I am for my roommates who listened to me compassionately as I dealt with my anger.

Writing also helped me manage my anger. I wrote many letters to people I was angry with, not to mail of course, just as a form of release. It made me feel like I had said my peace. Some of the things that I wrote surprised me. Keep in mind that I had the reputation of a mild-mannered little old lady when it came to profanity, and I found myself writing "you Mother f***** son of a b***!" Haha, there's a good reason I didn't mail those letters!

My point is: find a way to release your anger that doesn't involve hurting yourself or someone else and you will be okay. As with all the stages of grief, this one doesn't last forever. If you love yourself and allow yourself to be loved by others, forgiveness will come naturally in time (Linn).

In the mean time, turn up your music and scream as loudly as you want to! If your roommates are like mine were, they will understand completely.

6

Personal Epiphany Number One

Yes, it is my problem.

Suicide

Genocide

War

Hunger

Famine

Persecution

Slavery

Manipulation

AIDS

Injustice

Discrimination

Addiction

Crime

It's real. There are children who will go to bed hungry tonight. Countless human beings walk this planet carrying a deadly disease-and they don't even know it. Somewhere, a teenager is planning to end her life because she fears the world will never accept her.

It's real.

For years, I ignored these things, for many reasons. Maybe I thought it was God's will that people suffer. Maybe I felt powerless to change anything. I don't know.

My response to these dilemmas was to say a prayer for the needy, the broken and the sick and ultimately assume that nothing would really change. "We'll never solve world hunger", I thought, "so why even try?"

Now I have my answer: Because if we don't, no one will. My exodus from faith has made me aware that if there is no god, or if god doesn't care about us, then it's up to us to take care of each other. The best thing I've done in my exodus is stop praying for my friends

and start helping them. When I notice a friend having a hard time, instead of whispering a prayer and leaving it up to God, I ask myself what I can do to help them. Then, on my good days, I do it.

I used prayer as a cop-out for too long. It was a form of learned helplessness. My belief used to be “Pray about everything. Give your decisions to God. God will do the work, you just be still and trust him”? Was that trust or plain laziness? Either way, there’s no sense in asking an invisible spirit to do something when I can just do it myself. I’m ashamed at how long it took me to figure this out.

It’s like the time I was moving into an apartment and I called a friend to help me set up my computer. He shocked me by saying, “It’s not that hard-you can do it yourself.” He wasn’t planning to come over. I was so mad at him! There he was, right across the street and unwilling to lend a helping hand to a friend in need. Begrudgingly, I began my first attempt at hooking up a computer. I hate to admit this, but my friend was right. It wasn’t as hard as I thought. I managed to set it up myself with only one problem in the end result. Somehow, with the way I plugged stuff in, the mouse could only be plugged in on the left-and I’m right

handed. So was my roommate. I decided instead of re-wiring the whole thing, I would just learn to use the mouse on the left. And that's how we used it all summer. In the beginning, I thought my friend was a jerk for not doing the job for me, but when it was over, I was glad he made me do it myself. So, I guess that whole "If you give a man a fish..." saying is true. If I rely on someone else for everything, I'll never have the self-confidence that comes with succeeding.

Speaking of learned helplessness, I just want to bang my head up against a wall every time I hear a Christian suggest that people should be depending on God, not medicine, for their healing. "You put more trust in Tylenol than in Almighty God!" they say.

Look, even if I do someday believe in a god again, I'm not going to petition heaven in tongues over a headache when I can take two painkillers and be done with it. That's one item on a long list of things I don't miss about being Charismatic.

I'm training myself to start taking responsibility and doing something that is going to make a difference. I don't know how to solve world hunger, the AIDS epidemic, domestic violence or anything on that list. But I know that there are a lot of people trying, doing their

best to make this world a better place, and I think I would like to join them. I'm done leaving the fate of the world up to a deity who may or may not even exist. I'm finished passing the buck. I'm ready to start really caring. I want to go further, be more, and try harder than ever before.

Who's with me?

Church: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

***T**omorrow is Sunday. As far back as I can remember, Saturday night has been reserved for going to bed early because Sunday school starts at 9:30am. Despite being mad at God, I still want to go to Sunday school. I like my teacher. She has been my teacher for many years and she has supported me and helped me all of those years. She has been real with us. She told us when she lost her temper at her dad's nursing home and when she was going through hell with a lawsuit she didn't deserve. When she met God all over again at a retreat and what she thinks of every political decision ever made. She*

cracks me up! I have never met someone so opinionated in my life and I love her for it. We dance at her annual Sunday school Christmas party and she orders pizza and jokes about how she hates to cook. So, yeah, I like Sunday school as long as she's teaching it.

I wonder if God is offended at me going to church when I'm mad at Him. I wonder what kind of example I'm setting for the teenagers at church, being mad at God and all. I think I can read the Bible as long as I read the children's version with the pictures and interactive questions. It's weird I know, but it works, so there.

So, how does one go to church when one is mad at God? Can one worship God when one is angry with Him?

I'll find out tomorrow.

I wrote that way back in the beginning of my struggle with faith. I still believed in God at the time, but I was very angry with Him because of some events that transpired in my life. On this Saturday night, I was back in my hometown for a few weeks before starting at my new college. Even though I anticipated going to church like going to the dentist, I believed that I had a

responsibility to go to church whether I felt like it or not, so I went.

A common question of emerging Ex-Christians is: “Should I leave my church? What about my friends there?”

Relax. There are no hard-and-fast rules about whether you should stay at your church or not. I am still involved in a non-denominational church because it fulfills my need to socialize and I feel free to be myself there. Make no mistake, I never plan to be a part of the same type of church I grew up in, but I like this one, even though I’m not a believer anymore.

Before I found that this church, however, I endured some pretty bad ones. During transfer orientation at my new college, I learned about a Christian organization on campus that I’ll call FISH. It was the largest Christian organization on campus (keeping in mind that the whole college only had about 3,000 students enrolled) and their main purpose was having weekly services on campus. I thought that might be a great place to meet people and find a social group to hang out with. At the time, I had no friends at my new college, so even eating in the cafeteria was intimidating. I am a very social person, and the thought of eating

alone terrified me.¹¹ After hanging around the FISH house, hoping to be invited to their first service, someone finally invited me. “Phew!” I thought “At least I’ll know one person there!” This is where the happy part of the story ends. The rest of it was a disaster.

The girl who invited me turned out to be a very popular, friendly person, which means I barely saw her since so many people wanted to talk with her. The band was making so much noise practicing that it was difficult to talk to anyone since we couldn’t hear each other. I tried to meet people, really. A politician would be proud of how well I worked the room. I introduced myself to at least ten students that night, most of them natives of the FISH house, and none of them were interested in having a conversation. It was like being on a really bad date, except with a lot of people at once.

When the service finally started (fifteen minutes late, which feels like an hour when you’re a social

¹¹ . Before I went to eat my first meal in the caf, I stood outside the building and called my sister, who had graduated from a secular university. “Can I just go sit with anybody I want?” I asked her “Because at Bible college, people who didn’t know each other ate together all the time and it was no big deal. Can I do that here?” She said I probably shouldn’t, but I did anyway.

leper), it turned out to be just like high school youth group, minus the fun games. Thirty minutes of popular worship songs, courtesy of the band, a sermon by the FISH pastor, and an altar call where a dozen or so students kneeled reverently at the front for about thirty seconds. Lucky me, I got to see it all from the front row, since I had chosen to sit by the girl who invited me.

As soon as the pastor amen'd the closing prayer, I burned a path to the exit. Ironically, the last thing I heard the FISH pastor say was, "Ya'll regular members, look around and introduce yourself to the new people. Don't let them get out the door without saying 'Hi' to them." I was the first one out the door. The outside air smelled like freedom, and I vowed that I would never go back.

If you happen to go to a friendly, accepting church, then I don't see any reason you can't stay if you want to! I was once a member of a church that was so friendly, that I didn't even care that most of the congregation was retired and the music was ancient. They were a second family to me; what else could I want? Don't feel bad about going to church if it makes you happy. There are ways to belong without believing.

Although I kept my vow of never returning to FISH, I discovered a Methodist place on campus that became a safe haven for me during the next two semesters. Not only were the people friendly, but they served us a free, home-cooked meal every Monday at lunch. And when I say “home-cooked”, I mean it was like Thanksgiving and Christmas all rolled into one meal. Every week, their kitchen was covered with food varying from casseroles, fruit salads, pasta, bread, vegetables, meat, pizza and desserts that equaled the size of the main courses!

I looked forward to Mondays because it meant I got to eat lunch at the Methodist house. I didn't even mind that someone preached while we ate. Usually, I was really interested in what was being said. Plus, it was packed so I never worried about eating alone. Although I thanked those people over and over, they probably have no idea how much a consistent, hot meal meant to me. It was one thing I could count on when I couldn't count on anything else. On days when everything was going wrong and my beliefs were a mess, I would say to myself “Hang on, Monday is coming!” Because of that, I still think very highly of Methodists.

The other obvious side of this is, if you can't stand walking through the doors of a church-if you feel isolated and alone there-or if some people there have rejected you because of your unbelief, leaving is totally understandable. My rule is, if the pain of staying is greater than the pain of leaving, then leave! A wise woman once told me "Don't put yourself in a situation that is going to make you feel bad." It's some of the best advice I've ever received.

If you would like to stay involved in some sort of religious rituals, there's no harm in looking into other religions or ways of thinking. Feel free to try out different things when you are ready, but don't pressure yourself to find a replacement for Jesus immediately. It's okay to be single!

For those of you with kids, your situation is very different because I'm sure you don't want to uproot your family just to accommodate your changed beliefs. Surely, there is a way to compromise in which your spouse and kids may still attend church if they already do. Perhaps you could agree to go once a month, or only to see programs in which they are involved. That all depends on your family's habits, the age of your children, and the level at which your family will accept

your “Exianity.” If this is your situation, I wish you the best of luck. I am in no way an expert in families, so I would recommend reading a book on this subject by an author who actually knows what they are talking about.

If, for whatever reason, you find yourself going to church when you don’t really want to (perhaps for your spouse, kids or friends) do not despair, it doesn’t have to be boring. Here are some activities you can do to make your time at church at least bearable, if not enjoyable:

1. Create a Christian buzzword bingo card. Fill in each box with Christian-ese words or phrases, such as “personal relationship with Jesus,” “the word of God,” “righteousness,” “blood of Jesus”-you get the idea. Every time you hear one on your card, cross it off until you have five in a row. Don’t forget to leave a free space!
2. Flip through the hymnal and mentally add “in the bathroom” to the end of the hymn titles.

Examples:

Lord Send a Revival in the bathroom

Lord I Want to be a Christian in the bathroom

The Solid Rock in the bathroom

Yes, it’s juvenile, but funny nonetheless!

3. Translate the bulletin into pig latin. It can be pretty unny-fay.
4. Use a pen to color in all the o's in the bulletin. (who *doesn't* do that?)

Communion Sunday (you may call it the Lord's Supper) is especially fun when you're an undercover Exian. I discovered this when my temp church¹² took communion today. The pastor (who is ultra-serious) gave a somber speech about how unbelievers and unworthy believers should not eat the mini-cracker and drink the juice. I ask you, from the Christian perspective, what is the worst thing that could happen if an "unsaved" person partook of the Lord's Supper? If unbelievers are already on their way to hell, what do they have to lose? Would they go to hell twice? That whole policy is comical to me. I took part in the ritual just like everyone else today, and I have yet to be struck by lightning or cursed with leprosy. My guess is, if you'd like to blend in and do what everyone else is doing, it won't hurt a thing!

Ultimately, your involvement in church is *your* decision. You may want to tell your pastor about your

¹² Temp Church: a church you attend for the summer until you can go back to college and attend your "real" church.

changing beliefs, but then again, you may not, and that's your business. If you *are* the pastor, I suggest sneaking away by taking a nice vacation and never coming back. Or, even better, you could claim God has called you to the mission field in a far-away, exotic location. I hear Hawaii is beautiful year-around!

Should I Try to De-convert Christians?

No. Consider this: How effective would it be if someone tried to convert you back to Christianity?

Probably not very effective. In the same way, it's a waste of time to try to convince believers that they are wrong. A change that big has to be one's own decision, and we should know that better than anyone. So, please don't drag a horse to water and shove its head under to make it drink. The horse will probably kick you, and it will be your fault.

A Christian will either continue in their beliefs to the grave or change their mind along the way, and we must be careful not to say there is only one good way to go.

I discovered this while eating lunch with my sociology professor. We were discussing how much we can't stand church teachings, and how we are glad that we started questioning things. Then she told me something very important. She said: "Some people need those Christian beliefs and that's okay. Some can't handle questioning their faith and they like the way their religion simplifies life. That works for them. So we should leave them alone and just let them do their thing." I have come to agree that as long as someone's beliefs don't hurt themselves or others, they should be allowed the freedom to believe it without harassment from me or anyone else. After all, for many people, Christianity provides comfort, happiness, and life purpose, and I'm not about to take that away from them.

Furthermore, I now understand that people don't change until they are ready to change. For example, we all know people who know they would be healthier if they lost weight. Perhaps they have heart problems, diabetes, joint pain, back pain or various other ailments

that could be cured by losing a certain number of pounds. No matter what, though, if a person is not ready to make lifestyle changes that would result in better health, then they won't do it. So, knowing this, unless someone is making decisions that could end their life quickly(such as illegal drug use, suicide attempts, or dangerous sexual practices), I don't say a word about it. If *they* express interest in changing their lifestyle, then I offer my support, but only if *they* want to.

It's the same way with a person's spiritual beliefs. I don't believe in the concept of "God's timing" but I do believe that every person's life has seasons, which change periodically, and some seasons are more conducive to lifestyle changes than others.

During high school, not only was I not mentally ready to de-convert, but my circumstances just weren't right for it. High school was dramatic enough without dealing with a faith crisis at the same time. Also, I had not begun treatment for my anxiety disorder, so there's no way I would have survived detox and the depression that comes with it.

College, however, was the perfect place for me to question my beliefs. I was living away from home in a diverse environment and I had professors who taught

objectively in regards to religion. I learned about evolution, the Big Bang Theory, and the origins of major religions. The library became a second home to me where I spent hours devouring books, magazines and reports on a variety of subjects. Since no one was telling me what to believe, I had the freedom to decide for myself. Interestingly enough, I had always heard in church that secular colleges were evil places where Christian teenagers had their minds warped by “secular humanism.”

Youth pastors have long been pondering why their good little teenagers often drop out of church after enrolling at a secular university. Often, they unnecessarily blame themselves, saying “Maybe I did something wrong. I should have disciplined my students more. I should have stayed in touch. I should have taken them on more mission trips...” Many theories have been formulated about why college kids leave the faith, but I would like to suggest an idea that has not been presented: Could it be that when teens are finally given the chance to evaluate their beliefs without a youth pastor looking over their shoulders, they decide that their former ideas don’t hold water? Maybe their dearly held beliefs helped them in high school, but when

moving into adulthood, were no longer necessary. A new season of life sometimes requires a new outlook.

That's why I never criticize teenagers for believing, even if they are fanatics, like my former self. Christianity gave me an identity and kept me out of trouble during a time when my peers were making decisions that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

Churches and Christians surround me where I live. There is no part of my culture unaffected by religion and sometimes it gets annoying, but I keep reminding myself that if I want to be respected, I have to respect others. The last thing this world needs is more intolerance.

9

Confessions of a Former Pew-Jumper

Iwrote this chapter especially for ex-Pentecostals/Charismatics. I realize this information won't be relevant to everyone, so for the benefit of the reader, I've written a little quiz that will help you determine whether or not you are a true holy roller. Give yourself one point for every statement you can affirm as "true."

1. I know where Azusa Street is and why it is significant
2. I have either attended the Brownsville revival or I have seen a tape of it.
3. I know that a "Holy Ghost Carwash" has nothing to do with soap and water.

4. I know what a “Jericho March” is.
5. I am skilled at concentrating in the midst of chaos.
6. I have been in a church service that lasted more than four hours.
7. I know why there are stacks of towels on the church platform.

If you answered yes to ANY of the above statements, this chapter is for you. If that list totally confused you, this chapter will give you a break from serious subject matter and you can be entertained for a few pages.

If you’ve never been to a Pentecostal revival meeting (or youth camp) you have missed one of the most interesting combinations of religion and emotion you could ever experience in one night.

Usually, but not always, it’s like a three-ring circus. There are so many things going on at once that you may not know what to look at first. In one corner, a woman might be face down on the floor screaming her lungs out, while down in front, someone is dancing in a wild, scorpions-in-your-pants fashion, and a preacher is screaming at a line of people, pushing them down to the floor one by one. On stage, whatever musicians that are

present are playing a song about the holy ghost that they have repeated thirty five times.

Welcome to my childhood. I thought this was normal.

Being manhandled by 250lb preachers who screamed their prayers as if god was hard of hearing was the run-of-the-mill church ritual. We figured the louder and faster someone prayed, the more “anointed” it was. Christians who were not accustomed to that atmosphere found it difficult to concentrate while everyone prayed out loud at once. How “good” a service was depended on whether total chaos broke out or not. If you were picking up hairpins and other accessories off the floor when it was over, it was a 5-star service.

I remember hearing old-timers reminisce about the days when “moves of God” were even more played up than they are now. My ex-pastor told the story of when he was a kid in a Pentecostal church. During a Sunday night service, the pastor locked the back doors and said no one was going home until there was a move of God. I don’t remember how the story ended, but I have a hunch that moves of God probably started happening *really* fast.

Being the on-fire-for-Jesus, Assemblies of God girl that I was, I was almost always down front getting prayed for by big, loud, crazy preachers. One thing that guest preachers did frequently while visiting our church was interact with us, the congregation. Prophesying was one way they did that.

Hearing from God was something special, so when someone claimed to have a “word from God”, everyone sat up and listened, hanging on every word. The more “words from God” an evangelist had, the more spiritual he was thought to be. Guest evangelists would sometimes point out certain parishioners (yes, in front of everyone) and tell them God had something to say directly to them. Then they would go on to predict the future or tell the person something about his/her personal life. For whatever reason, this happened to me many times.

By the time I finished high school, various preachers predicted that I would have an anointing like Smith Wigglesworth, a ministry like Rita Springer, become a missionary and some other vague predictions about aspiring to greatness. Perhaps the funniest time was when, with no warning, a preacher dumped a whole bottle of extra-virgin olive oil on my head while he said

something that I do not remember. When I got home, my mom asked me if a bird had pooped on my head. Needless to say, I showered before the evening service!

One thing I can say with confidence about my charismatic upbringing is that it was never boring.

Humor aside, having prophecies spoken to me at such a young age put quite a burden on me to make sure they were fulfilled. Since the age of twelve, I felt that god had “called” me to full-time ministry. For a while it was cool being the “special kid”, but after my time at CU I just wanted to be normal. Having a normal life with no earth-shattering expectations placed upon me (by myself or anyone else) seemed ideal. This is when I started realizing that none of the prophecies or callings were real:

“Today while I was helping cater for a wedding I seriously considered whether I was ever really called into the ministry or not. An hour of sliding cheese cubes onto toothpicks gave me plenty of time to think about it. I'm not sure anymore, but now probably isn't a good time to decide things like that. It would be really embarrassing after all these years to say “I was wrong. I thought I knew what God's voice sounded like but I was totally wrong.”

One day, after leaving CU and taking my shattered faith with me, I was driving down the road thinking about the prophecies for my life. At that point, I had been so burned by Christianity that I no longer felt guilty about not being in ministry. I couldn't say for sure whether my "calling" was legitimate or not, but I didn't care anymore. It was my life and I would not let the former expectations of myself or anyone else direct my future. After only three semesters of dealing with religious people, my sanity was hanging by a thread, and I knew I would be certifiable if I spent one more day in that environment. I heard myself say out loud "Screw the prophecies. Screw the prophecies!" and I started laughing at myself. I laughed because I was so happy to finally be free to do whatever I wanted. It was a drastic change from my former plans, but I say, when your dreams don't fit anymore, find a new one and don't feel guilty about it!

Some of you are ex-Pentecostals, so you know what I'm talking about. Maybe you too have been prophesied to do great things for god and now you feel guilty for changing your plans. I know it's embarrassing to go from being a gung-ho missionary to checking out of the ministry world altogether, but don't let

embarrassment stop you from doing what you truly want to do. I stayed with my focus on children and switched from a Children's Ministry degree to an Elementary Education degree and I am a very happy aspiring teacher! When I was transferring colleges and didn't know what to major in, my Dad gave me this piece of advice: "Find something you like to do that pays the bills. You don't want to get up every day and dread going to work." After spending one school year in the classroom, I know that I can do this and be excited about going to work every day.

It is your life and no one can live it but you, so get out there and start doing what makes you happy!

I've heard that you never really appreciate something until it's gone. Take sanity for instance. I never understood what a gift it was until I lost mine! Growing up in a charismatic church, I saw my share of psycho-Christian people, and I must admit that I fell into that category at one point myself. I don't know about other churches, but in ours, there was great emphasis of listening to the voice of God, following the leading of the *spirit*, waiting for the *spirit* to move, letting the *spirit* fall on you. We really put the "mental" in "fundamentalist." Come to think of it, with all that

emphasis on the *spirit*, it doesn't make much sense that we were anti-Halloween, but then again, a lot of things we did don't make sense to me now.

What sent me and many others over the edge was all the talk about listening to the **voice of God**¹³ and tuning in to His voice. I knew I should always be ready to change my plans at a moment's notice when the **voice of God** directed me elsewhere. At the time, I devoured Smith Wigglesworth's writings (a hero of the charismatic movement) who constantly emphasized listening to the spirit. He actually wrote that when you get confused about the voices you are hearing in your head¹⁴ you should directly address the voice in question and ask it "Did Jesus Christ come in the flesh?" and if the voice answered "No" then it was the voice of the enemy (Wigglesworth). Woah! Back the insane train up here! Hearing voices? Talking to the voices? The voices talking back? WHY did we think this was okay???

That's an example of how insane someone can get with this "hearing the voice of God" business. I had it bad. You don't want to know the details, but let's just

¹³ It's so serious, I had to put it in bold!

¹⁴ This is a fairly common problem experienced by Charismatic believers and patients in mental health facilities. Are you seeing a connection?

say it's amazing that my parents didn't give me random drug tests throughout my adolescence.

If church teaching has caused this kind of confusion in your thoughts, then don't hesitate to talk with a mental health professional about it. I know it's embarrassing to talk about being crazy, especially with a stranger, but therapists generally are very understanding people. Here's how you'll know if your therapist is experienced with ex-Pentecostals. If, after you tell her what kind of church you just left, she takes out an extra-thick legal pad, retrieves a snack from her desk, pours a cup of coffee and lies down on her own couch, you will know she has done this before!

Then there's the emotional manipulation. You know how it goes. All ex-Pentecostals do. Loud, emotional music + peer pressure = doing things you may not remember-or for that matter, *want* to remember- in the morning. I'm not talking about getting drunk at a party or using drugs at a rock concert. No, I'm talking about "manifestations of the Spirit." Dancing wildly, running around, screaming, crying, doing back flips (oh yes, it happened at my church camp), speaking in tongues, et cetera.

In my eleven years of church camp plus all the youth rallies and meetings in between, I accumulated enough stories to entertain people for the rest of my life.

Sometimes while it was going on I got the feeling we were being manipulated, but to say that out loud meant being labeled a “skeptic”, which is not at all tolerated in those types of situations, so I didn’t say anything. Now that I’m a grown-up, I am disgusted at the way young people like me were manipulated by our leaders into doing whatever made them look more spiritual.

“Pray louder!” we were told, so we prayed louder. “Lift your hands!” “Speak in tongues!” “Scream like a banshee!” (Ok, that last one was made up, but it *could* have happened!) The commands were endless. I remember at one youth camp we had a teaching session every morning, and without fail, every morning our speaker told us to raise both hands in the air and say “Jesus, I love you” until our volume convinced him that we really did love Jesus. When I picture 500 students obeying these commands without thinking, I am reminded of the movie *iRobot*, and that freaks me out.

I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with instilling a sense of right and wrong in children. As a

teacher, I do believe that it is our duty to help kids learn to make good choices and treat each other with respect. However, the level of programming that we ex-Pentecostals experienced went beyond reasonable and into the realm of sci-fi movie of the week.

So, now that we have left the Pentecostal influence, what do we do with these memories? I'm just thankful that most of my antics were not caught on tape, so there's no permanent record. But still, the memories hurt.

When I first started my journey away from the faith, I was so incredibly ashamed of my past that it was overwhelming. "How could I let myself be manipulated like that?" I asked. "Why didn't I realize this before?" "My god! I was psycho, wasn't I?" What made so much sense at the time now seemed foolish. After going through my period of shame and anger, I came to a place where I just accepted my past.

Yes, it happened. I let myself be manipulated for too long and I even encouraged others to go along with it. I did some crazy stuff. But I know I'm not the same person now as I was back then. Everyone has something in their past they are ashamed of, and this just happens to be mine. I can live in shame and regret and self-

hatred, or I can forgive myself and move on with my life.

I am choosing to forgive myself and move on. I hope you will soon be able to do the same. If you look on the bright side, we Pentecostals have acquired a set of skills that could possibly spruce up a job resume!

Skills I acquired as a result of being Pentecostal:

1. I can make up a gospel song on the spot and drag it out for 20-30 minutes. Years of singing black gospel songs in a choir taught me this.
2. I do a great revival preacher impersonation. (Let the church say “Yeah!”)
3. I can find the book of Acts with my eyes closed.
4. I will do practically anything in public. (Hey, what could I have possibly not already done?)

Answers to the Pentecostal Quiz:

1. Azusa Street is in Los Angeles. This location is where the American Charismatic movement is said to have started.
2. Brownsville Assembly of God is a church in Florida that experienced “revival” for about five years straight when I was a teenager. It was like a Pentecostal Mecca. People traveled there from all over the world to see it. I never went, but I saw a tape.
3. A “Holy Ghost Carwash” is where a bunch of people stand in two lines facing each other to form a tunnel, then other people walk through while the people forming the tunnel pray for them. I cannot overemphasize how dramatic it is. It’s not unusual for people to pass out at the end of the tunnel.
4. A Jericho March is just what it sounds like. People form a line and march around a location, like a church, or a

house, or a city. The purpose is to claim that ground for God

5. It takes an insane amount of focus to concentrate on praying while surrounded by a hundred other people praying out loud at varying volumes and in different languages, plus loud music, plus making sure you don't get kicked or stepped on.
6. This is more typical for a special event, like a camp meeting or revival. Of course not all services last that long, but it's always smart to pack a lunch just in case.
7. You non-Pentecostals are going to think I'm making this up, but I swear I'm not! A lot of Charismatic-type churches keep a stack of towels or sheets on the platform to cover people when they pass out (or to be correct "Are slain in the spirit") Think about the fact that most women will be wearing skirts and it's hard to be

ladylike while you're falling on the
floor.

Things I Do Not Miss

Sure, walking away from your faith can be devastating, but it's not all bad! As I think back to my experience with Christian culture, there are many aspects of it I do not miss. Here are a few that make me laugh every time I remember:

1. Little Timmy Stories

At youth rallies (gatherings of Christian teenagers designed to motivate them to be better Christians) I have heard countless stories like this: "Little Timmy was a regular high schooler just like you. He decided he wanted to make a difference on his campus for Jesus. One day the leader of a gang was

bullying Timmy at school. Just as the gang leader was about to punch Timmy in the face, Timmy said, "Jesus loves you." The gang leader broke down into tears and accepted Jesus as his savior right there. But that's not all. Then the gang leader witnessed to his homeboys and the whole gang got saved. Then everybody in the whole high school got saved. And everybody lived happily ever after."

This is such a load of bull crap! I have heard countless stories like that and I honestly don't think any of them actually happened. I think they are Youth Group Urban Legends that have been told for years and no one bothers to question them. Sometimes amazing things do happen, like American's first and second Great Awakening. But you're just setting enthusiastic kids up to be disappointed when they knock themselves out and their whole high school doesn't get saved.

2. Suffering Missionary Stories

These are really just Little Timmy stories with an exotic twist. You know, the ones about Jim and Linda Smith who are in some third world country battling malaria, typhoid, chicken pox, frostbite, and of course the local witch doctor as they spread the gospel. As we all know, the witch doctor is the first to get saved, and

then he goes back and tells the rest of the village that they shouldn't make a feast out of the new people because blah blah blah...

It's like there's a universal template for missionary stories that all preachers must follow. The only differences are location, names, and catastrophe.

For your enjoyment, I've created a Missionary Story template for you so you can make your own stories, Mad Gabs style!

Once upon a time in (country) there lived a missionary couple named (name) and (name). They were all alone on their mission field serving Jesus with their (number) children. The natives were not friendly to the missionary family and planned to kill them by (murder tactic). Well, the dramatically-inclined family made a deal with the witch doctor. Whoever's god performed the biggest miracle would win. The witch doctor was astonished when the missionary's God (insert mind-blowing miracle, complete with special effects and an explosion). The witch doctor immediately became a Christian, and then the rest of the village converted too. The End.

3. Boycotts

American Christians are constantly being told by their leaders to boycott something. It's not enough to have our own moral code. It is also important to coerce our society into holding the same values by refusing to support anything that could slightly be misconstrued as an insult to the Christian faith. There was always some product I wasn't supposed to be buying or some TV show I wasn't supposed to watch. Most of the dangers associated with these things were imagined.

I've heard these ones over the years:

1. Disney movies (they contain explicit subliminal messages)
2. Sesame Street (Bert and Ernie are gay)
3. Yoga (it's another religion)
4. Care bears (satanic)
5. Spongebob Squarepants (he's effeminate)
6. TV shows with gay characters (promoting the "homosexual agenda.")
7. WAL-MART (for offering benefits to the partners of gay employees)
8. Christian rock music (I don't know why)
9. Pepsi (they put "One Nation... Indivisible" on their two-liters after the Sept. 11th attacks.

“Under God” was missing. This merits a boycott.)

10. Disney World (I don't know why)

11. Ford Motor Company (for sponsoring a gay pride parade)

3. The Sex Talks

"Life in Lubbock, Texas taught me two things. One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, dirty thing on the face of the earth and you should save it for someone you love." - Butch Hancock (Losing My Religion)

That quote cracked me up the first time I read it. It's funny because it's SO TRUE. When I was in Jr. high/high school, all the youth pastors thought they were so cool for preaching on sex but they must not have realized that if you preach on the same subject every week, we will start to tune you out until you sound like the adults in Peanuts cartoons. “Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah...” The youth group speeches went more or less like this:

“Your virginity is the most precious gift God has given you, and the worst thing you could possibly do is give that gift away too soon. If you have sex before you

are married, you are robbing your future spouse of that precious gift. Not to mention, you won't even be able to look that person in the eye you had sex with. Nothing messes up a relationship like sex. Sex brings guilt, shame, and separation from God. Sure, God will forgive you, but you can NEVER undo what you did. When you have sex, God considers you and your partner as permanently attached to one another, even if you marry someone else.”

I got so tired of “Just say No to sex” sermons that to this day when I see someone wearing an “I’m Worth Waiting For” button, I want to form tackle them. I always thought that a good sermon ended out with the message of salvation. However, I was surrounded by youth pastors who thought a good sermon should wrap up with “Five reasons to stay out of the backseat.”

Dealing With Regrets

I think the hardest part of leaving my faith has been realizing the mistakes I made and the people I hurt while on my divine mission to save the world.

One very twisted teaching in fundamentalist churches is “save the lost at any cost.” You probably know what it’s like to feel *enormous* pressure to convert unbelievers over to Christianity. “Make every place you go your mission field”, I was told. The consequences of passing up an opportunity to convert someone could be grave indeed. Just imagine your best friend burning in hell, screaming “Why didn’t you tell me about Jesus??”

Churches thrive on scare tactics, and that's definitely one of their doozies. I didn't want anyone to go to hell on my watch, so I became a salesman for Jesus.

I don't want to spend a lot of time listing my regrets because, frankly, it's still much too painful. I will say, being a Jesus salesman meant that I had little respect for non-Christians and you can imagine what kind of relationships that produced. During the height of my psychotic stage of evangelism, I sent a letter to a family member pleading with him to accept Jesus. It was one of the weirdest, most psycho-Christian writings I have ever produced. Like Christian television on speed. The good news is that I eventually snapped out of my psychosis, realized my wrong-doing and apologized for the letter. He quickly forgave me, and our relationship is much better now.

Another relationship I was able to mend was with a friend whom I abandoned after he came out to me as being gay. Even though I already knew before he told me, I still didn't know how to act or what to say when that time came, so I didn't say much at all. For a year. It was a long year, the year that everything about me changed. When I started supporting gay rights, I knew I had to find him and apologize for my bigotry. It took me

a while to get in touch with him because he wasn't returning my phone calls (Could I blame him?). However, I finally found him online and sent him a message saying how sorry I was for not being a good friend to him. It was an apology I had been rehearsing for six months over and over in my head. I was terrified that the damage I caused to our relationship couldn't be fixed. The day after I sent him my apology, I found his reply in my inbox: he forgave me. Tears of joy and relief streamed down my face when I'd finished reading. He gave me a second chance and we've started building our friendship back again.

I don't enjoy telling you about the stupid things I've done, but I do so to give you hope that relationships you may have damaged due to your Christianity are not beyond repair. I was surprised to find out that others could be so forgiving of my screw-ups. They not only relieved me of my guilt, but also when they forgave me, it gave me the strength to forgive myself.

Of course there were many other times when I did dumb things in the name of Jesus, so many that it would be depressing to start thinking of them all. The above two people I mentioned are the only ones I have been able to reconnect with; the rest have long since

moved on with their lives and left no forwarding address. Once again, I don't blame them. I don't want crazy people knowing where I live either! Maybe someday our paths will cross again and I will get the chance to apologize and tell them how I've changed...but I know that may never happen.

To deal with the guilt attached to situations I cannot make amends for, I have found one ritual to be very therapeutic. I highly recommend trying this. Take a sheet of paper and write down your regrets about one thing. Write down everything you said, felt and did and why you regret it. Write until you have nothing left to say. When you are finished, take that paper and rip it into a million itty-bitty pieces. Destroy it and throw it in the trashcan. That's a little ceremony I do when I start obsessing about my past, and it makes me feel better every time.

Another thing I do if there's no paper handy is close my eyes and picture the person I hurt saying to me, "I forgive you. Don't worry about it. I have moved on with my life and I want you to do the same." I replay it over and over until I feel better.

I have always been hard on myself, regardless of my religion, so this really drives me crazy. To be

perfectly honest, I don't know when this is supposed to get easier. At this point, it's still hard for me, and the best thing I can do is take it one day at a time. As my online friend, Brian told me: your past can only haunt you if you let it.

I previously wrote about dealing with regrets over things that you personally did. But sometimes we take responsibility for things that were done *to* us, which carries its own brand of regret. In a religion dominated by men and obsessed with sex, it's no wonder there are so many sex scandals being reported involving ministers.

I have dealt with sexual harassment inside and outside the church, and I know what it's like to feel shame over something that is not your fault. I repeat, over something that is *not your fault*. Why is it that the ones who should feel ashamed rarely are and the innocent ones blame themselves? If anyone, inside or outside the church takes advantage of you sexually, *it is not your fault*. It doesn't matter if you paraded across their front lawn naked; it's not your fault. In my opinion, pastors have far too much power, and unfortunately, many of them abuse that power.

To all the Ex-Christians who have been violated by men in the church, I want to say, “I am so sorry.” I cannot imagine the level of hurt you must be experiencing. You deserve more than sympathy; you deserve your dignity back. I’m not qualified to give you any advice about recovery from sexual abuse, but there are organizations for people who have been abused by clergy members and if you’re looking for support, they might be good places to start.¹⁵

One last piece of advice: Don’t beat yourself up about your past. It’s an easy trap to fall into because we feel we deserve a good lashing. I have sung the “How Could I Be So Stupid?” blues a million times, but listen to me when I say it doesn’t help anything. The best thing you can do to help yourself heal and move on with your life is to cut yourself some slack. Think of it this way: you did what you thought you had to do at the time. You were under extreme pressure to conform to the standards of Churchianity, and you just did what you had to do. You’re a different person now and you know better, but at the time you didn’t.

So, take that guilt and put it in the past. The church may have taught you to live in guilt, but those

¹⁵ SNAP and CEASE are the two I have heard of.

days are over now. Our lives are too short and precious to spend the whole time looking backwards. For once, we have unlimited permission to be happy- so we should take full advantage of it!

12

Depression: I Just Want to Feel Better

“**D**epression” is such a bad word in the church. For the most part, it is not regarded by the church to be an actual medical problem, but a symptom of spiritual anemia. Their prescription for depression would read as follows: “Count your blessings” “Snap out of it” “Stop whining,” “Rejoice in the Lord,” or my personal favorite: “Rebuke the devil!”¹⁶ Blah, blah, blah, blah, the list goes on. People who say these things are probably sincere, but they sincerely don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.

¹⁶ We Assembly of God folks used “rebuking the devil” as a catch-all solution, very similar to the way men use duct tape to fix everything. Except the duct tape is more useful. To think, all those years I screamed at the devil I could have just been using duct tape!

Here's the deal: you are grieving a huge loss right now. Even a very tough, smart, and optimistic person can experience a period of emptiness and darkness in their lives. If you're doing fine, then great! Skip this chapter! If not, read on.

Feeling bad is totally understandable considering the shit you're going through right now. Some people can be frustrated or sad without it interfering with their daily lives, and if you're like that, I'm happy for you. Some people have it worse than others. If a perpetual cloud is hanging over you and your sadness starts to interfere with your life, like a change in sleeping and eating patterns, lack of energy, or lack of interest in things you used to enjoy, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor about it, especially if these symptoms persist more than two weeks. Does this sound like a Zoloft ad yet?

It was tough to erase years of church programming telling me that depression is a sign of weakness, but when I had finally had enough of my emotional rollercoaster, I marched myself into my doctor's office with my head held high and talked with her about my symptoms. Remember this: it takes guts to ask for help. She put me on a regular dose of anti-

depressants, and I have been better off ever since! I laugh now when I remember how I used to be so opposed to taking anti-depressants. I sure am glad I got over that!

During that office visit, my doctor told me that the best results could be achieved with a combination of meds and counseling, which I was already doing. The two go well together. Going to a therapist taught me how to change my thinking and behavior patterns so that I could better cope with life, and meds balanced my emotions so I could think clearly and make healthy decisions.

At first, I was totally freaked out about seeing a counselor. Most people are. Talking honestly about your deepest feelings with a stranger sounds intimidating, but it's really not that bad. (Lying down on the couch, like on TV, is totally optional.) After a while I actually enjoyed going! It's really a great set-up. A good therapist will never act shocked or make fun of you. She won't force you to do anything you aren't comfortable with, and she doesn't tell you what to do; she helps you figure things out for yourself. Plus, therapists must maintain strict confidentiality. Pretty cool, huh? I wonder if it's similar to going to confession...

Just so you don't sue me, I'm going to tell you that medication and counseling do not make your life perfect. Those things helped me quite a bit, but they didn't put me in a state of perpetual bliss. I'm not sure any legal substance can do that for you! I still experience emotions like sadness, anger and happiness, but in more manageable doses instead of a drastic up-and-down pattern.

The process of losing my beliefs was the hardest thing I have ever had to deal with. Depending on your situation, you also may be dealing with this on your own for a while before you figure out who you can trust and who you can't. If you start to feel overwhelmed, you might try finding something (other than addictive substances) to help you de-stress. When I'm really upset, I get the urge to clean. It helps me put my nervous energy into something constructive. During that pivotal summer with my roommates, I scrubbed our bathroom quite a bit!

I want you to know that you have options. Depression doesn't have to take over your life. Severe depression may influence you to think you are trapped, that no matter what, you will never feel better. Been there, done that, and it sucks. Feeling like there's no way

out is the worst. If the “s” word crosses your mind, that should be a red flag to you. Suicidal thoughts should not be blown off as ‘no big deal.’ It IS a big deal. Your mind is playing tricks on you by telling you that death is the only way out of this nightmare.

I had two friends who believed that lie. One was sixteen, the other was nineteen. I now carry around their obituaries in my wallet as a reminder that *nothing* is worth taking your own life. Nothing. Your problems are fixable, whether it appears that way or not. If suicide seems like an option right now, put this book down, pick up the phone and call your doctor. Or your best friend. Or a mental health clinic. Or a hospital. Or the national suicide hotline at 1-800-SUICIDE.

I know asking for help is embarrassing as hell. There’s nothing fun about it, but your life will start to get better when you have the courage to ask for help. And isn’t that what you want? I don’t think any of us really want to die; we just want to feel better, and doing something as simple as talking with your doctor can put you on the road to feeling better. There were (and still are) many times when I did not want to ask for help, but I knew that it was my responsibility to take care of myself. I can’t expect others to read my mind and know

when I'm having a hard time. I have to tell them what I want them to know.

I know you may feel terrible right now, but trust me, no matter what your feelings tell you, it *will* get better.

13

The Courage to Let Go

What would you believe if you had no fear? I know that's hard to imagine.

It's even hard for me sometimes. We were told our whole lives to maintain a fear of God. After all- to defy him was to place the eternity of your soul in jeopardy.

From the time I was a child, I saw plays at church depicting the Judgment of God. Four friends would be riding in a car together, two Christians and two non-Christians. Suddenly, a car crossed the median and headed straight for them. We heard the squeal of tires and the metal-on-metal impact. Then, everything went black. The four friends found themselves at the judgment seat of God. The Hallelujah Chorus played triumphantly as the angels ushered the Christians into

heaven while they squealed with joy. Then, the other two friends were all alone. Scary music struck fear into our hearts as Satan and his demons appeared, dragging away the unbelievers as they kicked and screamed bloody murder.

It's the strongest motivator imaginable- the threat of burning in hell for all eternity. That is precisely the reason I ever accepted Christ in the first place and the reason for every religious escapade I participated in- fear of God. We weren't of the "once-saved-always-saved" persuasion. Our persuasion was, "The same God who saved you can un-save you!" So it makes sense that the first concern I had during detox was "What if I go to hell?" It's enough to make you drive the speed limit, that's for sure! After my initial detox and questioning my beliefs, I wasn't afraid of going to hell anymore. This is one of my journal entries I wrote during that time:

Yes, it's Sunday, which means it's the roughest day of the week, but it wasn't too bad today. I helped run an appreciation breakfast and a baby shower today so it kept me busy. My attitude during church truly was horrible though. Right off the bat we were reminded (albeit in a semi-lighthearted way) that we had better

not lie because liars go to hell. Alright, good morning to you too. I haven't slept well in months, I was awakened at seven o'clock this morning by an enthusiastic dog jumping on me, I got here two hours before you did and the first thing you remind me of is my possibility of going to hell?

I pretty much put that concern out of my mind though, because that whole idea just does not make sense to me. Back in the day, I might have actually been worried about it, but now I'm just like, "I'm sorry you live in fear of going to hell. It must suck to be you."

Possibly the second most powerful motivator the church uses for good behavior is THE RAPTURE. Remember this chorus: "There's no time to change your mind, the son has come and you've been left behind...I wish we'd all been ready"?(Norman) How could I forget? I heard about the Second Coming from the time I was a child. I sat through many badly produced movies on the subject. Too many. Even when I was a Christian, I thought it was unethical to use rapture movies to scare people into being saved. It seemed to me that when scare tactics are used to influence someone, the resulting decision is not genuine.

It is totally normal to have fears left over from your believing days, like fear of angering god, fear of missing the rapture, fear of committing the “unpardonable sin”, and fear of going to hell just to name the big ones. At first, you may find yourself saying prayers of repentance “just in case.” For me, quick “Lord, forgive me” prayers were such a part of my daily life that it wasn’t something I thought about. Depending on where you go from here, you may still offer prayers of repentance to some deity, but since I’m currently agnostic, I don’t.

My fear of hell was the hardest thing to overcome. I was so afraid of what would happen to me if I denied God, put down my Bible, and walked away. I kept thinking, “What if I go to hell?” This journal entry I wrote describes my process of letting go:

I once read that you will be the same person in 10 years if not for the books you read and the people you meet. I'd like to add, " and the movies you watch." I have devoured the movie " Fight Club" ("Fight Club") ever since I saw it for the first time a few weeks ago. It's trippy, it messes with your mind, and it makes you question things, especially your identity. A popular line is, "You are not your job. You are not your car. You are

not how much money you have in the bank. You are not your f- - - ing khakis."

The film's bad-boy character, played by Brad Pitt, talks a lot about letting go and hitting bottom. "It's not until you lose everything that you have the freedom to do anything" he says.

After watching it for the third time, I'm starting to understand. In an email this week, I told my friend that losing my faith was the best thing that ever happened to me. My beliefs were everything to me. I let them define me and own me. I had no identity outside of my religion.

Then came the crash.

I haven't lived many years, but feeling the emptiness and deafening silence of a world without a god, and then feeling totally betrayed by the highest power I had ever trusted, that is the closest I have come to "hitting bottom." Wrestling, kicking and screaming with what I had once believed left me exhausted and angry, very angry. The scariest part was no longer having a religion to define who I was. I had nothing to hide behind, no labels to stick on myself. It was just me, whoever that was.

A significant scene in Fight Club is when Brad Pitt is holding down Edward Norton and chemically

burning his hand. Norton begs him to stop, the searing pain is more than he has ever felt before, and you can hear his flesh sizzling. Pitt refuses to release him, insisting that he stop running from his pain and embrace it and own it. He tells him to let go. At that moment, Pitt lets go of Norton's still-burning hand and Norton rests in on the table, allowing it to burn. Only then does Pitt neutralize the burn by dousing his hand with vinegar. "Congratulations" he says, "You're one step closer to hitting bottom."

Like Pitt refusing to release Norton until he stopped struggling, I am thankful that I had to go through so much mental turmoil to discover my identity and my own beliefs. Like Norton, I did have to come to a point where I just let go and allowed myself to not believe anything. I had to overcome my fear of not believing, of not living up to my own expectations, of failing, and just let go.

The only people who understand this are probably those who have hit bottom themselves, or are currently there. All you want is for someone to rescue you and make the pain stop. Maybe you're still struggling, beating yourself up for not believing. Or maybe you're cringing, waiting for God, if he exists, to punish you for

your questioning, or your apathy.

I usually refrain from giving advice, but if you're looking for some, here it is: Let go. Let go of trying to be perfect. Let go of worrying that if God exists that he must be mad at you. Let go of trying to be something that you're not, and just be. You wouldn't be mad at a corpse for being dead, so don't be mad at yourself if your beliefs are dead.

I know it sounds crazy, but when you give yourself permission to be you, to question, to love God or hate him, to believe in him or not, things will start getting better. Not overnight, but it will get better. And I'm confident that the truth will find you in due time. At least it worked that way for me.

Facing Tragedy Without God

Yesterday I received a package in the mail. I opened the yellow envelope, unwrapped the tissue paper and held a small stuffed platypus in my hand. Tears stung my eyes as the memories came rushing back.

This was the platypus my friend Shirley won at the county fair when we went together. That was about three years ago, back when I was still in high school. Back when Shirley was still living here... before she moved back home... before she got leukemia and died. I had nothing to remember her by, not even the program

from her funeral, since it was thousands of miles away and I was late in hearing that she died.

I finally called her mom on the phone last week and we talked for half an hour about Shirley. She filled in the gaps for me about how her last two years were spent. She offered to send me one of Shirley's stuffed animals since she had such a collection and her family didn't know what to do with all of them. I asked if she would send the platypus she won while we were at the fair together, and she said she would.

Not getting to say good bye really tore me up. So much had happened to both of us in the time span we had been apart. I wanted her to know that I'm okay now; that I don't feel out of control anymore. I'm not scared of God like I use to be when she knew me. I'm not a believer anymore, but that it's okay because I have so much peace now. I'm finally happy. But I never told her that because we lost contact with each other.

It's probably for the best. She would have been sad to hear that I left the faith, even though I am so much happier now. I wouldn't have wanted her to be sad. Life was a struggle for her anyway without giving her something else to worry about. Having spent most of her life as an alcoholic and a drug addict, she had a lot

of regrets that really bothered her. Even though I met her after she quit using, she still described herself as an addict. She explained that an addict is still an addict even when he or she stops the behavior. Hence the saying: "Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." I just thought of her as my friend. I was proud of her, because after she did become clean and sober, she became a substance abuse counselor. I saw her help a lot of people.

Along with the platypus (she named him Joshua), the envelope contained a hand-written card from her mom and the bulletin from Shirley's funeral. Her strong faith was reflected in the memorial service. Everyone who knew Shirley knew about her love for God, so it was only appropriate that she have a Christian funeral. Her mom assured me over and over that Shirley is in heaven now with God- a much better place. In the past, that thought would have comforted me, but as my circumstances have changed, it doesn't affect me the same way.

I don't know what I believe about the afterlife. Certainly, if there is any justice in our universe, she is in a better place, finally getting to rest. If anyone deserved a break, she did. Her compassion extended to everyone

in need around her. I wonder if I will ever see her again. It hurts to think that I'll never again hear her northern dialect call me "sweetie." I wonder if I'll ever hear her laugh again. She loved to laugh. I think I'll formulate my beliefs about life after death later. Right now, I'm just going to let myself grieve in her absence and assume that the place she is in right now is making her happy. I can't bear to think anything else.

It makes sense to think that loss would be harder to deal with as an Ex-Christian, but it's not that way for me. If anything, it's slightly easier because if I believed in God, I would be furious at him/her for taking Shirley at such a young age. Especially since she was such a good person. It was always hard for me to accept that God had some divine reason for making people die anyway. It's easier for me to live by the philosophy of "Crap happens indiscriminately to everyone and there's no rhyme or reason to it."

I used to cope with tragedy through prayer. Now it just seems silly to talk to thin air, so I don't. I deal with my grief by writing about her. I try to remember things she told me, like "It's just stuff." I remember one time when I made her laugh so hard with a joke about therapists:

Q. How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb?

A. Just one. But it has to *want* to change!

I was so glad I could make her laugh. I don't know where Shirley is now, but if she can see me, I hope I'm not making her sad by leaving the faith. I hope she's happy for me, because I'm free now. And that's all either of us ever wanted-to be free.

15

Getting Your Self-Esteem Back

Popular church phrases that help run your self-esteem into the ground:
“We’re just sinners saved by grace”

“I’m not anything special-just a tool in the hands of the master.”

“I didn’t accomplish anything-all the glory goes to God.”

“Who are we to question God? We are insignificant and stupid compared to Him!”

“Even the best of us deserves to go to hell”

In a nutshell: We are nothing, we can do nothing, and we deserve nothing. It’s no wonder our self-esteem is such a

mess! What are we supposed to think when we've been told over and over: "You're never good enough, because God wants you to be perfect and you will never be perfect so you will always be a failure. We are sinful, sinful, sinful! We cannot go ten seconds without sinning." Put that mess back in the compost bin where it belongs! It's really okay to think of yourself as a good person, hey, even a great person! Start reminding yourself of what you do right instead of where you "fall short."

Here's a fun exercise you can do. I did it last New Year's Eve. Take a sheet of paper and write down everything you are proud to have accomplished in the last year. It may surprise you how long your list is! My list included getting a piercing, designing a mural, exercising regularly, flying by myself, and learning to cha-cha. I keep that list on a corkboard in my room to remind myself of how capable I really am. I am smart, I am powerful, I am independent, and I make good decisions for myself. It's not arrogant to speak positively about yourself. In school, you were told "don't vote for yourself" but I say, if you don't vote for yourself, how can you expect anyone else to vote for you?

I was raised in a pretty hard-line denomination, and we sharply criticized preachers who sounded like motivational speakers. We figured that to be a good Christian, one must engage in a certain amount of self-flogging. Self-confidence gets in the way of godliness, you know. Even though I got off the Jesus train, I still like to listen to preachers like Joel Osteen. Joel is well-known for speaking positively and encouraging people to do the same. He has these trademark phrases like “You’re going over, not under!”, “Be the victor, not the victim!” and “You are an over comer!”

I think when someone starts telling you what a great person you are, whether it’s true or not, it makes you want to be a better person.

And another thing- everything you do doesn’t rise and fall on your faith in Jesus. I have heard that it’s only through Jesus that you can have a successful marriage, lose weight, pay your bills, or raise your kids. Enough of that already! I used to work at a women’s fitness center and I assure you, you can lose weight without doing daily devotions. Eating healthy foods and exercise does it for most people. And puh-lease! If praying to Jesus makes your marriage so good, then why is the divorce rate the same inside the church as outside?

I'm just saying, we humans are more capable than we believe. There is so much we can do to affect our own lives. I remember hearing that if you are not in the all-important "will of God", then your plans will fail. Maybe you were also told to consult God before making any moderately important decisions. Some people put their lives on hold waiting for "confirmation from God" when they could be out getting started on what they want. If there's a trip you want to take, a book you want to write or a job you want to pursue, then trust your own judgment and get started on it!

We believed for too long never to trust ourselves because "our desires are wicked" and "The heart is deceitful above all things." One good thing this de-conversion has done for me is teach me to trust myself. I am a smart, capable person, well able to make good decisions without waiting for mystical "confirmation" from a god I cannot even be sure exists. It took leaving my faith to realize that, and I hope that in this process, you start trusting yourself too. After all, if you can't trust yourself, who can you trust?

16

Personal Epiphany Number Two

Mean people are like cockroaches. Think about it: cockroaches are some of the oldest insects on this planet, with fossils dating back over 350 million years. Anywhere people can live, they can too ("Cockroach" 167). They are practically indestructible. In the event of nuclear fallout, after we humans have all been killed by the radiation, the roaches will still be around, high-fiving each other, ready to dominate the planet for another 350 million years (Robinson).

Mean people, like cockroaches, are never in short supply. As I discovered, some religious institutions

are full of them-, but there was a time when I didn't know that.

Once upon a time, I thought most Christians were nice people. Then I went to CU and found out how wrong I was, especially about Christian leadership. While I was trying to resolve issues I had with various departments, I found out that there is a strong relationship between someone's level of influence and their capacity to be a real jerk. It makes no difference whether a person believes in Jesus or not. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, with no respect to religion.

All I accomplished by filling out forms, meeting with department heads and swimming through red tape was finally understanding that I was more likely to get chocolate milk from a cow than any type of help from the university's bureaucratic system. Of course, that's the way it is in most institutions, both sacred and secular. Challenging the status quo is an uphill battle anywhere, but in my youthful idealism, I thought Christians would be more understanding and willing to help than their secular counterparts. Now, I just shake my head when I remember. I was young in so many ways!

The students were great people, though. I still have fond memories of my classmates and I met two of my best friends in the whole world there. The friendships I enjoyed there made it worth the hassle, but as I've said, my experience with the faculty, staff, and administration was another story altogether. When I knew I couldn't take it anymore, I called home and cried while I told my parents I wanted to leave. They were happy to help me transfer. My family barely survived the idiocy we fell victim to there and I'm just happy to have broken free with all my limbs intact.

Chances are, if you've had any face time with the religious powers that be, you have seen this ugliness first hand. It's disheartening, at the very least, to realize that you could get treated just as crappy at a fast-food joint and at least have a hamburger to show for it. At church, you not only don't get a combo meal-you give up ten percent of your income for that kind of treatment! Before I get to the good news, I want to tell you a story.

A few years back, I met a wonderful lady named Shirley, whom I mentioned in an earlier chapter. We both sat on the same row at church, and quickly became good friends. Shirley was a counselor at a half-way house nearby, and she dedicated her life to helping those

people get their lives back on track. It was no secret that for most of her forty-something years, she lived the kind of lifestyle that she now helped people out of.

She didn't like to talk about her past escapades, but she did like to talk about God. Even when she was going through hell in her personal life, she remained upbeat. When she was having a really rough time and I asked her "How are you?" she would smile and respond "How are YOU?" It was a signal to me that she was going through a hard time but she didn't want to talk about it. To know Shirley was to love her, and almost everyone who met her, did.

Then around the time I moved away to college, she moved across the country. No one seemed to know why she had left so quickly-I couldn't get much information. A year went by and I got word that she had leukemia and was not given long to live. I tried to contact her by phone and email, but to no avail. She was thousands of miles away, so visiting was out of the question. A few months later, she passed away before I had the chance to say goodbye.

Six months passed and I finally got the courage to contact her family. This morning, Kleenex in hand, I dialed her mother's number, ready with questions I

needed answered. Her mother answered the phone, and graciously spoke with me for half an hour about Shirley. She filled in the gaps for me about why Shirley left so suddenly and how she spent her days on earth.

What she said floored me.

Shirley, who shared my disease of trusting people too much, had been very, very hurt at our church by the leadership and some of the church people. I had no idea that it happened, but it was not hard to believe. The leadership at our church hurt and manipulated many people. I have experienced it, and it's not pretty.

After that, her mother told me, she returned to alcoholism, along with some other practices that surprised me, since the Shirley I knew had possessed high moral standards for herself. That explained why she left so suddenly and went under the radar for a while. She then checked herself into a treatment center and gradually got better. After that, she was hit with cancer and died shortly afterward.

When I found out that our church leadership had hurt her so badly that she returned to alcoholism, I was furious! Here was a sweet, good-hearted, precious human being whose whole mission in life was to help people, and some cold-hearted preacher screwed her

over in the name of Jesus just because he could! That is despicable!

This morning, as I sobbed my bloody eyes out, I learned something very important: some people are just mean. They are chronically mean people who not only do bad things, but they also do them with bad intentions. I could spend my whole life trying to destroy mean people, but it would never work, because mean people are like cockroaches. They have always existed, they always will, and they are virtually indestructible. Shirley wouldn't want me to spend my life trying to destroy. She would want me to spend my life helping people. That is what she did. After her death, her family received a lot of letters from people who said she made a difference in their lives.

By writing this book, I'm not aiming to destroy anyone, I'm aiming to help people who are hurting. Being hurt by an institution that you have given your life to can be devastating. Like Shirley, the hurt may knock you down for a while, but you don't have to stay down. The desire for revenge may be huge when you get back up, but remember that the best revenge you can have on someone who mistreated you is to live your life happy and free, while ignoring them completely. I know, it's

tempting to march up their front steps, ring their doorbell and cuss them out for every wretched, despicable act they committed, but should they really get that satisfaction? No way! Seeing you angry is exactly what mean people want, so don't give it to them!

Mean people may be like cockroaches, but freely living your own life is like flipping on a light switch. They will scatter when they realize they can no longer control you. It may take a long time to recover to the point of moving on, but you can do it. Eventually, I hope you are able to gather your courage, get back up and dust yourself off, because you deserve a chance to shine!

What If My Journey Is a Boomerang?

Jesus and I had an interesting history. After a long, committed relationship, we hit a wall and broke up. It was very messy.

There wasn't even a promise of still being friends. A few months went by as I talked with him, cried, sought advice from a close friend, and agonized over our future. I was sad and I thought it was because I had made a mistake by breaking up with him.

I became convinced we were meant to be together, so I begged him to take me back. I had changed some things about our relationship, but we were definitely back together again. Everyone saw us as a

couple, and I was comfortable with that. That was fine for a little while, but then I became really troubled about some of his beliefs. I asked a lot of questions that he didn't have good answers to. When I thought hard about the history of our relationship, I saw that I had doubts all along, but had just brushed them off. A quiet disappointment settled over me as I realized that I didn't want to be with him anymore. This time, the break-up was much cleaner. Without giving an explanation, I packed up my stuff and moved on with my life with no regrets. It was over, and this time it was for good.

Just like in normal relationships, you may “break up” and “get back together” with Jesus, and you have every right to do that. I know I did, and I'm sure others have too. One of several things could result from that.

One option is, you regain your faith in Christ and live happily ever after as a Christian until your dying day. And if that's how it happens for you, then cool. More power to you. Another possibility is, like me, you return to your faith only to remember why you left in the first place, and get out with more determination to stay out. Either way, you end up with more knowledge and experience than you had before, so it's a win-win situation.

A third possibility is you may return to your faith, but join a congregation with different ideals than your former church. If that interests you, there is a new kind of Christian church emerging these days that seeks to turn typical faith upside down. I have been impressed by the Revolution churches in NYC, Atlanta and Charlotte, North Carolina. They meet in bars and are typically more open-minded about social issues than the average American church.

My point is that it's normal to want to go back to your faith for a number of reasons, and if you decide to return, then that's okay. Maybe you'll be happy, maybe you won't, but giving it a try will help you know for sure either way. This is your journey and no one can walk it but you, so do what makes you happy.

This next part is for gay Christians. Yes, you do exist. With all the condemnation of homosexuality in churches today, the myth prevails that "gay Christian" is an oxymoron. Good, well-meaning church people believe this lie because (among other reasons). it has been repeated to them so many times We Exians, however, know that repetition does not make a statement true; it just makes it annoying.

If your only reason for leaving the faith was the fundamentalist condemnation of homosexuality, I am pleased to tell you that there is a whole denomination called Metropolitan Community Church that is known for embracing all types of sexual orientations. If you search for gay-affirming churches, you can find them, though there aren't as many as I wish there were.

Once upon a time, gay Christians were made to think that they had to choose between their sexuality and their faith, but now there are other options. No, despite what Fred Phelps would like you to think, God does not “hate fags.” If you are LGBT and you would like to reconcile your sexuality with your faith, I recommend the book What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality by Daniel Helminiak.

Before deconverting, I researched this topic and found plenty of evidence that the Bible does **not** condemn homosexuality. I wrote several articles about my findings, using the book I just cited and a book by John Boswell titled Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century.

A film on the subject is “Fish Can’t Fly” (“Fish Can’t Fly”) featuring, among several gay Christians, Peterson Toscano, whom I like to call the hero of the Ex-ex-gay movement. Peterson is a funny, relatable guy who works very hard to help his fellow gay Christians realize that they are accepted by God just as they are. He has written a lot of material that stems from his own experience as a gay Christian who tried unsuccessfully to change his sexuality in an attempt to please God. His website is www.petersontoscano.com

Science is finding more evidence to suggest that sexual orientation is not a choice, so I believe it is only a matter of time until more churches open their doors to the LGBT community.

Just because Jesus and I aren’t together anymore doesn’t mean that I don’t want anyone else to have him. My purpose in writing this book isn’t to convince you to “throw down your cross and follow me.” I just want you to feel free to have faith in whatever you choose without being motivated by fear.

18

Coming Out to Friends and Family

Oh, just shoot me! This is not a fun subject, but it's one of the biggest fears that come with leaving faith, right up there with "Am I going to hell?" Coming out as Ex-Christian carries a lot of risk for rejection, and it will be the acid test that reveals who your real friends are.

At first, I thought that I had a responsibility to tell my family right away about my change of heart and mind. Thankfully, while reading posts on an Ex-Christian message board, I discovered that I don't *have* to tell anyone! As a matter of fact, it would be wise in my situation to put off that conflict until it absolutely has to happen. If your family and friends are religious, it

doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that they will likely not be thrilled about your new way of thinking. Detoxing from your religion is hard enough without the pressure of your family's fear, grief and anger, so I recommend that you keep this info between you and a few people you can trust until the time is right for the fam to find out.

Of course, there is no law stating that you must tell your family at any time. That is completely up to you. Every family is different, and you should do whatever you feel comfortable with in your situation.

One thing to consider is their opinion about eternal security, that is, whether Ex-Christians go to heaven or not. Some branches of Christianity teach that Ex-Christians will still go to heaven because salvation is eternally binding. Other denominations teach that if a Christian rejects Jesus, then they forfeit their place in heaven. This will make a difference as to how upset they will be about your decision. Again, do whatever would be best in your situation. You know your family better than I do.

I picked out a few friends that I felt I could trust and told them one by one. After being rejected by a friend for supporting gay rights earlier in the year, I was

very careful about whom I told. At the time of this writing, I've discussed my Ex-Christianity with twelve people, including my ex-pastor, and their reactions have been mostly positive. Some just nodded and said "Okay," others affirmed me wholeheartedly and only one tried to talk me out of it. As you can see, he didn't succeed.

I have yet to bring it up with my family, and am content to leave it that way as long as possible. My life is finally settling down and I am not eager to invite in more heartache and conflict. Naively, I thought that the sooner I brought up the subject, the sooner the storm would be over, but after giving it some thought, I know that is not the truth. In reality, the sooner I bring it up, the longer I will live with the consequences. There's no time limit when it comes to family tension.

I learned something while I was in the middle of The Great Gay Debate of 2007. When people are scared, they sometimes do and say very hurtful things. It scared some of the people who knew me when I started supporting gay rights earlier this year. They could see I was changing and there wasn't anything they could do about it. Of course, there were also the mean people who were never my friends in the first place, but people

like that will always be around, and it's best to ignore them. People are most afraid when they think they are going to lose something, and I think some of them were afraid of losing the Amy they always knew. That explains why they said some of the hurtful things they said.

One friend has had a particularly hard time accepting this big change in my life, but I think he's trying and that counts for something. However, I have figured out that we cannot have a discussion about this and keep our friendship intact, so ultimately I suggested that we drop the subject entirely. If the situation becomes too volatile, the best thing to do is just agree to keep that controversy out of your friendship. And that's all right. Religion and politics are probably the two most divisive topics in existence and it's best to steer clear of both in conversation¹⁷.

Some of your more assertive friends and relations may try to get you to change your mind. (I know, because I used to *be* one of those assertive friends and relations). Some might recommend Christian books for you to read. Several people suggested I read books

¹⁷ Unless you are a talk show host in which case, controversy = more attention= your next paycheck

by apologists Lee Strobel and Josh McDowell. Lucky for me, I was one step ahead of them. I read several of Lee Strobel's books in high school (giving several copies away to "doubters") and although I have not read McDowell's books, I am very familiar with him and what he does.

If someone suggests that you read a Christian book, or go talk to a pastor, or in any other way tries to "save you", remember that you don't owe them anything. If you are genuinely interested in reading books from a Christian perspective or talking with religious leaders, then do so, but *only if you want to*. If your loved one accuses you of being closed-minded, or something else you find offensive, you don't have to launch into a theological debate. You can simply say "I'm sorry you feel that way" and leave it at that. It takes two to argue, so if you don't participate, there's no argument.

I think it's pointless to argue with someone who has his mind made up, anyway. My theory is when people argue about something, it's because they aren't really sure about it themselves. If someone wants to argue with you, it's because they are really trying to convince themselves, not you. Your refusal to argue

may be seen as further closed-mindedness, but that's their problem, not yours.

Here are some classic responses you might hear at some point from your Christian friends/family and my comments on why these statements are annoying:

1. "How could you throw away your beliefs so quickly?" or "Do you understand what you're doing?" This question is irritating because the person assumes that you flippantly threw away your beliefs in response to a single, isolated event. Most likely, the erosion of your beliefs was a process that took months or even years to bring you to this point. Even in the unlikely event that you did rake your beliefs down the disposal one morning after breakfast, you have a right to do that! It's your life, and in most modern countries, you have the right to believe whatever you want. It astounds me how Christians think it's wonderful when a non-believer runs to the altar and accepts Jesus, but will criticize an Ex-Christian for "leaving too quickly." Quite the double standard.

2. "Satan is deceiving you." Oh yes, I remember that in Pentecostal World, everything

that made us feel bad was “an attack from Satan.” Colds, wrong numbers, car wrecks, dead batteries, etc. Of course these events were only classified as Satanic Attacks if it they happened to an American Christian. If something unfortunate happened in a foreign country or to a gay person, it was deemed the “Judgment of God.” Now that I don’t believe in Satan, it doesn’t bother me at all if someone thinks Satan is attacking me.

3. “You’re just going through a dry spell.” No, a dry spell is when you don’t feel like reading your Bible. De-conversion is when you no longer believe what the Bible says. Those are two very different things.

4. “This is just a phase. Most people doubt their faith at some point.” Translation: “I hope this is a phase. Please let it be a phase!” When I hear this, I feel like I’m not being taken seriously. I’m sad to say there are people who will only support you as long as they think there’s a chance you’ll come crawling back to the faith. Initially, they will act so accepting and supportive, but after time goes by and it dawns

on them that you really meant it, they will disappear. On the other hand, I asked one friend how she would feel if this turned out not to be a phase and she said she would love me just the same. SHE is a true friend.

5. “You must have never really believed in the first place.” At its core, this statement is a defense of the Christian faith. Christians have a responsibility to defend the perfection of their belief system no matter what, so when you forsake it, they will likely assume the problem is with you, not the system. Doesn't that make you feel special? No? Me either. This one angers me the most. I want to respond: “Who are *you* to make judgments about the sincerity of my faith?” Unfortunately, this is a very popular assumption and one you're likely to hear. The sad thing is, sometimes the people who say this are the ones who had so much confidence in you when you were a Christian. This is how I recommend dealing with it: refuse to get into a debate about whether or not your faith was real. Arguing will be a waste of time. Shrugging it off by saying: “Whether you

believe me or not, I know my faith was real and that's all that matters." should suffice.

6. "Romans 3:23 says..." I want to reply, "It's great that you memorized your Power Verse for the week-, but I don't care what the Bible says. If I did, I would still be a Christian." I feel insulted when people quote scripture at me because they're implying that I don't know the Bible, and that's not true. I'm not a theologian, but as a Christian, I was more familiar with the Bible than most of my Christian peers. I had a very thorough education of the scriptures, so I would like to be treated as such.

People who tell us these things have no idea the pain we have experienced while tearing ourselves away from our former beliefs. They don't know the extreme courage it took for us to leave our familiar territory and venture into the scary unknown. If they knew, they definitely wouldn't be saying things like that.

The sad thing is I am probably guilty of using all those annoying responses I listed above. When I was a Christian, I couldn't understand why anyone would want to leave the faith. My only assumptions were that either people left because they want to live in sin, they never

really believed in the first place, or Satan had deceived them. Classic. I should cut Christians some slack, because really, I know where they are coming from. I even remember the pressure to cut off contact with people who had defected from the faith. Thank goodness, that doesn't happen in every case!

I have been pleasantly surprised by how many of my friends didn't let this affect our relationship. I expected their reactions to be worse than they were. Eventually, though, someone is going to reject you because of this change in your life and it is going to sting. The closer you were to the person, the worse it will hurt.

One such person in my life was Tiffany.

Tiffany and I had been friends for years. We were classmates, prayer partners, and a source of support in each others' lives. I counted her as one of my best friends. When I graduated from high school, she was one of the few classmates I kept in touch with.

When I lost and regained my faith the first time, she was the one who supported me and called to check up on me.

Strangely enough, I was still a believer when our friendship came to a halt. I started supporting gay rights and because of some pro-gay things I published on the

internet, rumors were flying around that I was a lesbian. I didn't care what people were saying about me because I knew the rumors weren't true, but that wasn't good enough for Tiffany. She would rather me not support gays at all. Understandably, this change in my beliefs scared her and left her feeling very upset, but what happened next surprised me.

After several conversations and a chain of events where I tried in vain to make her feel better, she told me, in certain terms, that she didn't want to be seen with me anymore. Her reputation as a Christian could suffer if people associated her with a gay rights supporter, she reasoned, and it just wasn't worth the risk. I cried, and I cried, and I cried some more. I sought advice from almost all of my friends, and they all said the same thing: "Anyone who treats you like that was never your friend in the first place." I felt like I was losing a best friend, but the truth was, I was just realizing that we were never friends in the first place. Finally, I decided to let it go and move on with my life, even though it felt like a piece of my heart had been torn out.

Some people in your life will support and affirm you to the very end and some will break your heart. When I get down about being rejected or I worry about

how my family will react when they find out, I just remember the friends I have who will back me up no matter what. And you know what? It doesn't take a whole fan club; just having one person who believes in you can give you the courage you need to be yourself. I know it is tempting to revert back to your old way of life just to keep people happy, but remember that your true friends will ultimately love you no matter what-and the others? Let them go! You don't need that kind of negativity in your life.

My favorite line from "Madea Goes to Jail" is: "If somebody wants to walk out of your life- *let them go!*"("Madea Goes to Jail") And those who want to stay-hang on to them. True friends are hard to find, so if you have even one, count yourself lucky.

19

Community: Finding Somewhere *Else* to Belong

Becoming an Ex-Christian doesn't just change your Sunday schedule; sometimes your social life changes too. I am always glad to hear stories from Exians who have understanding families and friends, but for every story of acceptance, there are probably ten stories of rejection, isolation and loneliness. I think I know the reason for that.

I have not done a formal study on this, but from what I have seen and heard, Christianity is more often

adopted by a whole family rather than just one person in the family. Keep in mind that what I have observed is Christian culture in the southern US and I am aware that Christian culture is not the same everywhere. Here in Dixieland, though, if you are from a Christian family who raised you in church, then your social life was likely connected to church in some way, which meant the majority of your friends were Christians.

In my case, I was raised by a Christian family, fourth- generation Assemblies of God. I attended a Christian school from Kindergarten through twelfth grade (oh those plaid jumpers!) so pretty much all my friends were Christians¹⁸.

So, since my world revolved around Jesus from Kindergarten up, it felt crappy to suddenly not belong in Christian culture. Church used to be my oyster. I could walk into any church and feel I belonged there, but after my de-conversion, I felt like the odd puzzle piece that doesn't seem to fit anywhere. I still attend church for social reasons, but it is not the same. When I look around and see people worshipping, I feel disconnected. I can no longer identify with people when they talk

¹⁸ Looking back, I don't regret going to a Christian school. I got a good education and made some great friends there.

about Jesus being their Savior and Lord, because I don't believe that way anymore. Christian music used to be my genre of choice, but now it makes my skin crawl! This blog entry I wrote a while back sums it up pretty well:

I visited my old youth group tonight. It was good to see my friends but it was awkward. Awkward because I just don't fit there anymore. I sat next to Brian, an old buddy who is a male version of who I used to be. He goes to the university I just transferred from and I see him doing the same things I did.

Tonight while my friends played their instruments onstage and sang new worship songs, I reflected on this experience, this journey I'm on. I used to thrive in church, especially Pentecostal-type churches. But now it's like trying to breathe underwater.

I have dealt with loneliness on and off through this process of leaving. Things will go great for a while and then an unexpected bout of loneliness will hit. Really what I'm craving is someone to talk to. Someone who will listen, nod, and be sympathetic. I don't have any real live friends like that for the time being, but I have discovered a whole online community of Ex-Christians who are more than willing to share each

other's burdens. I am a member of an Ex-Christian online forum, which has been a place of refuge for me. No matter what I write about, the other Exians understand what I'm going through. It's one place where I don't have to watch what I say and fear being rejected. The feeling of being accepted is pure ecstasy. When a member has a question or just needs to vent, the community immediately responds with empathy and advice. It is so comforting to know I am not going through this alone. I hope soon to find some local friends to chat with about this, but until then, I have a great online community.

If you are packing your bags to leave Christianity, you might be feeling alone, too, like no one understands how you are feeling. I guarantee you, there are people out there who have been in your shoes and would love to be there for you as you're going through this transition. Even journeys across the driest deserts are bearable with friends. If you are just starting out, an online community is a great place to vent, ask questions and just be yourself. I was surprised at how much easier life became when I found just one place where I didn't have to pretend.

This reminds me of a guy named Martin. Martin and his friends were regulars at the bar in the restaurant where I worked. Every weekend for about a year, I looked forward to greeting his group as they came in the door. Then, strangely, he disappeared for a while. He didn't show up for a month. I wondered what happened to him. Then one night he and his friends came in and I asked him where he'd been. He looked worn out. He said he had been taking care of his dad, who died of cancer that morning. Then he said the words that will forever ring in my ears, "I just needed to come home." The place where everybody knew his name and was always glad he came...our bar. I'm glad he felt so welcome there.

That's one thing we all have in common regardless of religion, color, or gender: Everyone needs a place to call home, even if it's not the place your mail is delivered.

Things I Do Miss

Yes, despite my cynical, to-hell-with-it attitude I so often display towards Christianity, I do have a soft side, and sometimes I get nostalgic. Today, it sneaked up on me during math tutoring, when I least expected to be discussing faith issues.

During a break, my math professor and I were pouring coffee for ourselves and she commented on how strong the coffee was. Her comment jogged a memory

from when I went on a missions trip to Eastern Europe, so I told her about how amazed I was to find out how strong coffee is brewed over there. “They serve it in small cups because it doesn’t take much of their coffee to get a good dose of caffeine,” I told her. When tutoring resumed, she asked me questions about my trip to Eastern Europe, and I immediately overflowed with my favorite memories from the trip. It’s been a while since I reflected on that trip, but it was one of the greatest experiences I ever had. We immersed ourselves in the culture by spending most of our time with Europeans, shopping in their markets, using their highly unusual toilets, visiting their churches, and picking up words and phrases in their language. We even spent two days in a gypsy village near the Turkish border, which was the coolest cultural experience I have ever had!

When people return from missions trips, they always say “I can’t wait to go back” and that’s true for me. I would go back in a heartbeat. It would be wonderful to see the students again that we became so close to while we were there. Even though it would be on different terms, I would still like to go back someday.

Of the other things I miss about having faith, the biggest one is the instant connection Christians have

with each other that crosses linguistic and cultural barriers. I have that same connection with agnostics and atheists when I find them, but non-believers are hard to find in this part of the country so I don't enjoy that connection as often as I would like.

And what about all the get-togethers Christians have? Believers have multiple opportunities to socialize with one another through state, national and international conferences. They have Christian camps in the summer, See You at the Pole in the fall, Christian concerts all year-round, and missions trips to every country on earth. I think we Ex-Christians should mobilize and come up with international get-togethers where we can meet each other. We could even have matching T-shirts!

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Cleaning House

I am an avid reader. As far back as I can remember I have devoured books like candy. It is not unusual for me to work on reading three to five books at one time, thus, as a Christian, I accumulated a lot of religious books. There's no telling how much money was invested in my collection, but now what do I do with them? That was probably the second question I asked (after "Am I going to hell?") in my process.

I have finally found a solution for the books. First I took a load of them to my church where I knew

they would find a good home after being checked out of the church library. I still had plenty left over, though, so I solved my problem by joining an online book swapping site. I send my books to people who want them, and in return, I receive books I want to read. As a result, somewhere, a pastor's wife is enjoying my Smith Wigglesworth books, and I'm flipping the pages of a memoir about growing up gay in the South. Irony, sweet irony.

One item, however, gave me some trouble. It's a big, thick Bible with commentary from possibly the most legalistic preacher ever born. I hate what he wrote and would have no problem trashing it, except...it was gifted to me by my grandmother. I cannot, in good conscience, throw away anything my grandmother gave me. I love her too much to do that, and besides, one day when she's gone, I'll be glad to have something that reminds me of her. So, there it sits on my bookshelf, where it will remain indefinitely.

I still have no solution for my huge collection of Christian music. I have too much money invested in CD's to just dispose of them without being paid or

traded for something good¹⁹. For the time being, my music is in several cases stacked up in a closet.

It surprises me that I haven't had the same problem with Christian t-shirts. I collected plenty over the years, but now I can't seem to find more than a few. I don't know what happened to them, but it's just as well. All they would be good for is washing the car or fifty cents in the next garage sale.

I never had an "I Love Jesus" bumper sticker or a Jesus fish on my car, but I did some research for you readers on how to get those off, if you so desire. From HGTV.com (HGTV):

"Bumper stickers can also be safely removed from a car with a hair dryer and plastic razor blades. Heat the sticker with the dryer until it feels warm, then slowly scrape it away using the plastic blade. Plastic blades are available at most auto-parts stores."

So, there you have it! Clearing your house of Christian paraphernalia will be the easiest part of this process, and now you have the tools to do it.

¹⁹ Speaking of which, I am continually embarrassed at how badly Christian bands are named. There's this preoccupation with Bible verse references that leads some music groups to give themselves catchy names like "Ezekiel 3:27" or "The Isaiah 40:1-6 Band."

All I Really Wanted to Know

Tonight, after reading that a meteor shower would be visible, I dragged a lawn chair into the back yard, settled in, and gazed at the sky for an hour. No phone conversations, blogging or multi-tasking of any kind. It was just the darkness, the chirping crickets, and me. I watched stars reveal themselves against the black sky, sparkling like diamonds. Meteors shot across the sky,

which, come to think of it, looked like angels lighting and throwing bottle rockets. Watching the celestial beauty pageant tonight reminded me how good life is.

At the beginning of this journey, I worried that my life would be empty without Jesus. According to Christian myth, there is a god-shaped hole inside all of us that only Jesus can fill, so I thought I would feel unfulfilled without him. The truth is my life has gotten better since I left. I finally feel good about my life and myself. Don't get me wrong, I have experienced all the struggles I wrote about in this book, but the struggles are so small compared to how peaceful and complete I feel inside.

Now I know that life can be beautiful and good without faith in god, and that's really what I've been wondering all along.

Ready to Fly

I subscribe to Beliefnet's newsletter, which is how I got into reading *Beyond Blue*, a blog written by a lady who is learning to live her life after surviving a major depression. She wrote something I believe to be beautiful and true: "Recovery from very severe depression is similar to the metamorphosis, or chrysalis, of a caterpillar to a butterfly. Only in struggling to emerge from a small hole in the cocoon does a butterfly get wings strong enough to fly. As she squeezes out of that tiny space, the liquids inside her body cavity are pushed into the tiny capillaries in the wings, where they harden. Should you try to help a butterfly by tearing open the cocoon, the

poor thing won't sprout wings. Or if she does, they won't be strong enough to fly. No struggle, no wings."

(Borchard)

Gosh, I will Amen that.

The discussion topic today was "How did you gain confidence?" Here's my answer:

Two years ago, my self-esteem was a complete mess. Being suicidal was just a way of life and I think stress was sometimes the only thing holding me together! I have to really think to remember what it was like because I've changed so much since then, but I do remember wanting to die so badly I could taste it. I thought god hated me and I felt the same way about myself.

So, how *did* I get my confidence back? Well, step one was getting the heck away from my church and the influence of my pastor. While I was there, I was too blind to see I was trusting someone who couldn't care less about me and being strangled by religion.

Step two was going to a great counselor who helped me realize that I am capable of taking care of myself and making good decisions. I will never forget her. She helped me start believing in myself.

Having a lot of health problems helped me with making my own decisions, too. With my family far away, it was up to me to make doctor's appointments, try a dozen medicines and stay on the phone with the pharmacy and clinic until I got what I needed. It was definitely a blessing in disguise.

During my first year living away from home, I did a number of things by myself for the first time, and every time I succeeded, it built my confidence. Looking back, it was during the times when I was stretched to my limit that I grew the most. The crying, tough decisions, doctor visits, and counseling sessions all made me stronger. I think the Beyond Blue blogger was right. No struggle, no wings.

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