

FROM WHEREVER SEARCHING COMES

BY HANNAH BAILEY

I used to think that I could sum up my testimony in about one sentence: “I was raised in a Christian family and I’ve been a Christian all of my life.” Last year I decided that I hadn’t been a Christian all of my life. I was baptized when I was around eleven years old for very childish reasons. All I remember thinking was that it was the right thing to do. I truly did believe in Jesus and I think that I was saved when I got baptized but I believed in a very childish and unquestioning manner. I accepted Christianity before I knew how to question it. Just as redwood seeds have to be exposed to fire before they will break open and begin growing, my faith matured only when I learned how to question it.

Growing up in a Christian home as a preacher’s kid brings its own set of struggles. I’ve found that people who grow up in Christian environments have very different struggles compared to believers who are raised in nonreligious settings. At times it is easy to accept what I’ve always been taught. It is easy not to question and, as a result, not to grow. I can hide in church; people will just assume that my spiritual life is blossoming. I know all the right things to say. At other times my rebellious side tells me that being a Christian is cowardly. It has never been very daring to simply accept what your parents teach you. I sometimes have to wonder if I only believe in Christianity because it is safe and familiar.

One day at school I met this guy who was inviting people to a Bible study. We started talking and he noticed the cross necklace that I was wearing and asked me if I considered myself a Christian. I told him “yes, I do,” but later, when I was mulling over the way he carefully worded that question, I wished that I had said no. I didn’t consider myself a Christian, I knew I was one. Still, in the back of my mind I cringed at the possibility of just calling myself a Christian without truly being one.

I used to think that being a Christian would be easier if I had one of those juicy testimonies that you always hear at youth retreats and FCA meetings. These not-so-hypothetical people were born into non-religious families. Their dads drank, and their mothers were distant. They turned to drugs and all sorts of awful sinful things during their teens. Then (this part usually happened when they were in college) they would have some big spiritual epiphany. They realized that what they’d been doing all their lives was wrong. They saw that Jesus Christ alone could save them.

These people can say from their experience with the dark side of life that they have seen the world and it is bad. They’ve tried everything on the buffet and Christianity is the only dish that satisfies their hunger. I still

sometimes think that everything must be so much clearer to them. It seems to me that people who become Christians as a result of recognizing their sin search in the right order. First they decide why they should believe in Christianity and then they begin to believe. I think that I am doing it all backwards. I decided that I would be a Christian and now I'm going back to decide why I believe. I'm searching with an answer in mind. I can't change the fact that I believe, but I feel the need to know why I do.

I knew on the inside that what I believed was true, but I started to think that I needed proof. My seasons of spiritual searching have fluctuated between two extremes—I've searched for intellectual proof of God as well as supernatural evidence of His existence. I was initially motivated to find reasoning to back up my faith by the desire to convince other people that I was right about Christianity. I wanted to be able to win people over with my brilliant reasoning. I wanted to prove that Christians aren't irrational and that we have good acceptable reasons for believing. After searching for facts that might convince someone, I started needing some convincing myself. My search became more self-oriented. The pendulum swung to the other side of the spectrum. When I realized that my "brilliant reasoning" went nowhere, I began desiring a more emotional type of reassurance. I thought that I would be sure of God if I saw some supernatural event that could only be from Him.

An AP Literature class that I took in my senior year of high school taught me a lot about how to question. The teacher, Mr. Burke, really loved what he taught and challenged his students to search and analyze literature as well as themselves. When we learned about Socrates and his reasoning, Mr. Burke challenged us to know what we believed and why we believed it. The class itself challenged the Christians to be able to explain what they believed in an intellectual manner. We had many discussions in which the Christians of the class were pitted against the "non-Christians." In a group project, we had to find ways that the Christians and secular people could come to a compromise on the big issues of our day such as abortion and homosexuality. I found that I could argue my side until I didn't know what I thought anymore, but that didn't change anyone else's mind. They could argue just as long as I could and sometimes more convincingly. While I had questioned my faith before this point, I took my questions more seriously this time. I felt that I was incapable of explaining the reasons behind my faith to anyone. Did I believe only because my parents believed? Was there anything wrong with that in the first place? I couldn't explain my belief, even to myself.

I went through three days of intellectual and spiritual torture in an attempt to answer some of the questions that Mr. Burke had raised in my mind. My main concern was that I didn't know why I believed in God. I couldn't lay out any acceptable reasons to believe in Him. Why did I believe in God? My only answer was that I just did. I remember sitting in the shower with the steam and water, weeping because I couldn't

imagine not believing in God. That made my doubt even more agonizing because I began wondering if I only believed in Him because I lacked the imagination and the courage to be able to believe anything else. Was I not brave enough to break away from my parents' faiths? Would I simply stick with what I had always known?

During my shower episode I felt like I had been thrown in the ocean with no idea of how to swim. Questions can be scary. I felt like my questions had eaten the ground right out from under my feet and that they were about to swallow me. Ironically, the whole time that I was battling with all these questions, I wanted to pray that God would give me peace. The only problem was that I was still trying to decide if I believed in God. It is silly to ask someone if they exist. I had nothing solid to push off of. That's where my parents came in. They couldn't tell me not to have doubts, they couldn't show me how to swim but they shouted encouragement from the shore. I couldn't pray at that point. Even though I wanted to, I was too distressed and confused to pray. My parents did for me what I could not do for myself. They interceded on my behalf. When I was struggling with things this made all the difference.

After failing to find intellectual reasons for what I believed, I pushed the issue aside and I started looking for reassurance from a supernatural source. There was a time when I regularly prayed that I would see a miracle or have a vision, that I would witness something that was undeniably from God. I wanted to have something to tell people if they ever asked me why I believed—at least, that's what I told myself. Cowering behind that façade was the real reason. I wanted reassurance. Miracles seem like common enough occurrences in the Bible. I wanted to know why I didn't see any happening in my church. I heard about miracles that other people had "witnessed" but had never seen one myself. I felt that people who had seen supernatural things could have no reason to doubt.

Christianity was so much a part of me that even when I was questioning it I knew that I couldn't arrive at any other spiritual conclusion. I don't know how to be anything other than a Christian. Every part of me has been touched by my Christian upbringing. I think that rejecting Christianity could be just as detrimental to my mental, spiritual, and emotional health as my body rejecting one of its organs would be to my physical health.

David Crowder's song "Here is our King" has a beautiful way of explaining the way God calls to us. Crowder says "From wherever searching comes/ (The look itself a trace of what we're looking for)/so be quiet now...and wait." These verses explain a lot to me. They say it doesn't matter why I am searching; the only thing that matters is that I search. It says that I will find a trace of the answer to my question in the very fact that I question it. Since humans have tried to make gods for themselves from the beginning of time, there

must be a God. We are hungry and there is food, we desire and search for God so there must be God. From the root of our searching springs the reason why we search. We just have to wait for it.

When I read *Blue Like Jazz*, I thought it was really interesting that the author, Donald Miller, says he doesn't think that he will ever walk away from God for intellectual reasons. He says that, "Sooner or later you just figure out there are some guys who don't believe in God and they can prove He doesn't exist, and some other guys who do believe in God and they can prove He does exist, and the argument stopped being about God a long time ago and now it's just about who is smarter." When I first read this I wondered if it was really okay to not base everything on the intellect. I really wanted it to be alright. I'm not one of those people who can convincingly prove with factual evidence that He exists; somehow, I just know that He does.

I particularly like Miller's analogy that explains why he believes. He says that it is as if there is some natural instinct that tells him to believe in Jesus. This made me think that maybe I don't have to be able to prove everything from Genesis to Revelation to believe that the Bible is true. I know that the Bible can be proved by factual evidence but I'm not one of those people who need to hear the historical evidence in order to believe. I don't think that I will ever be able to reason someone into believing in Christianity, because I was not reasoned into belief. I think that there may be people that need to see the evidence and will truly be converted by it, but I am not one of those people. I'm learning that that is okay. For me, factual reasoning strengthens belief even though it is not the foundation of it.

Similarly, I learned that I don't need a miracle in order to keep believing in God's power to do one. I still have a desire to see God work in a supernatural way, but it is no longer a defining need. I've learned to see God working in smaller ways. For example, one way that God has been showing me glimpses of Himself is through Psalm 139. This psalm has been following me everywhere I go since it first spoke to me during a quiet time in Indonesia. It's been showing up in everything from my Wellness class, to the radio. Psalms 139 tells me that God is with me, that he sees me when I lay down and when I stand up. It comforts me even while it holds me accountable and it has been just what I need during my transition into college and living away from home. Little things like this are enough but at the same time I wouldn't mind seeing more.

Part of my spiritual journey has been learning not to stress. I struggle some questions that I sometimes lose energy before I get an answer. I've learned that finding an answer isn't always as important as simply looking for one. Searching is kind of like trying to see something in the dark. It is easier to see the object if you don't look straight at it. You have to focus on something slightly to the side in order to see it. In the same way, I've learned that I should focus simply on searching and not on getting an answer.

When I was questioning why I believe in God and looking for good reasons to believe in him I eventually had to just accept that I believed. I had to quit stressing about why I believed and start actively believing. I couldn't stop believing nor could I justify my belief but in the end I decided I didn't need to. I'm slowly learning to question things without rehashing everything that I believe at once. Instead of picturing my search as doubling back to justify things that I already believe, I'm learning to start moving forward. My faith is no longer based on the outcome of my every question. I'm learning to use questions to strengthen my faith instead of undermine it.