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Ten Sample "What I Believe" Essays

1. Good Deeds and Joy <i>Tanya Savory</i>	2
2. Believe It or Not <i>Dawn Cogliser</i>	5
3. How God Works <i>George Mattmiller</i>	9
4. This I Believe <i>Tonya Lapido</i>	15
5. My Personal Faith <i>Ayesha Rahman</i>	18
6. What I Believe <i>John Langan</i>	22
7. Numinosity <i>Sara Walden Oremland</i>	27
8. Opportunities to Give Back <i>Bob Miedel</i>	31
9. What I Believe <i>Richard Kratz</i>	35
10. What I Believe <i>Sally Friedman</i>	39

1 GOOD DEEDS AND JOY

Tanya Savory

When I was a child, my brother and I often stayed at our grandparents' tiny apartment in Pennsylvania for a week or so during the summers. Prior to our arrival, my grandmother did everything she could think of to make sure our stay would be perfect. She put candy in little containers everywhere and bought cheap comic books for us. She made a huge jar of bubble mixture out of dish soap and created "magic bubble wands" out of old hangers. As I grew older, I came to realize that my grandparents were poor, though I would never have guessed it back then.

Every evening before bedtime, I'd sit out on the small front porch with my grandmother and blow soap bubbles. Sometimes the evening summer breeze would blow the bubbles back to us, and they would land on my cheek with a tiny pop. I'd screech with laughter and my grandmother would sometimes say, "That's a whisper from Jesus."

"What's he whispering about?" I'd ask.

"Good deeds and joy."

I never really wondered why my grandmother said that; I just assumed she was right. I was six years old, and Jesus was a rather vague but nice spirit/person/being that supposedly looked out for me. When I read about Casper the Friendly Ghost in the cheap comic books, I thought Jesus must be something like that. A picture of Jesus (the one with his hair flowing and a gold light shining on him) hung in my grandmother's tiny kitchen. Another one hung over the bed where I slept. There was even a very small one on a stand next to the tub. That's weird to think about now, though it seemed rather comforting back then.

When my grandmother wasn't cooking or doing something for someone else, she read the Bible. My dad, her only child, said it was the only book she had ever read all the way through. And she had read it many times over. Grandmother lived by what she read. The Golden Rule wasn't just a pleasant thing to say, to my grandmother it was a serious rule that must be considered before all actions. Long before *What Would Jesus Do?* showed up on bumper stickers and tee shirts, my grandmother wondered that daily, possibly hourly. And so, she loved, rejoiced, avoided judgment of others, gave everything she could, spoke thoughtfully and gently, and lived simply. She tried her best to follow the examples of Jesus. In other words, she was a Christian in the truest sense, brimming with those whispered good deeds and joy.

I never knew exactly why my dad decided to become a minister, but I'm sure it had a lot to do with his mother. He was very close to her, and he knew that his being a preacher would make her proud and happy--and it did. Perhaps he was moved and impressed by how much the Bible had shaped his mother's life in awesome ways. But did my dad become a minister because he was such a true believer? I don't think so. He doubted and questioned and struggled even as he preached and built a congregation. I know he prayed, but I think he wondered if his prayers were really heard. Even so, my brother and I were instructed to say prayers before going to sleep, and like most children, we were dutiful to God in much the same way we were dutiful about brushing our teeth. We did what we were told without questioning the deeper implications of brushing teeth or praying.

When members of my dad's congregation burned a cross in our front yard after Dad preached a sermon about racial equality in 1966, he went from being doubtful to being disheartened. And when those same people began threatening my dad and then our family, he went from disheartened to angry. Who were these "Christians" who used their religion to hate and judge? Within two years, my dad quit the ministry. Our family went to a different church now and then, but now and then became less and less until it became never. By the time I was a teenager, religion was a murky and mostly-ignored area of my life. Because my parents had

become wary of overly-religious people, I became wary too. Reconciling my very religious yet very wonderful grandmother was a complicated problem. So, like religion, I ignored it.

For many years, I mostly skimmed along on the very outer edges of religion. Church, faith, prayer---those were things for other people. This feeling was further reinforced by coming to terms with the fact that I was gay and discovering that many Christians wouldn't want me in their churches anyway. In their eyes, I was a sinner and headed straight to hell. By this time, my grandmother had died, but I wondered what she would have thought. Would this nonjudgmental and endlessly kind woman with pictures of Jesus in nearly every room turn her back on me too? The thought of it put me at even greater odds with "religious people." Eventually, I pretty much just shut the door to that room of thought altogether. I held on to a vague belief in God, though I wasn't really convinced that God might not like me. Religion faded into an unsettling nothingness.

Then my dad got cancer.

In his final months of life, my dad struggled quietly. He knew he was going to die, and all the doubts, questions, and conflicted feelings about his faith seemed to suddenly roll over him like tremendous waves. One evening, I walked into his hospital room and he was reading the Bible. He put it down, looking almost apologetic.

"I just have questions, things unanswered. I wonder..." he said in way of an unneeded explanation.

Two weeks later, my dad died, and I was overwhelmed with things unanswered. I wondered...Was Dad in heaven? Does heaven even exist? Is he simply gone, returned to dust? Was God mad at Dad for losing his faith? What should I do? What would Jesus do? Who was Jesus anyway?

In the twenty years since my father died, I've reconciled how I *feel* about many of these questions, though I haven't definitively answered any of them. I guess I'm what you would call a questioning skeptic when it comes to my personal view of religion. It would be nice to think that all my grandparents and my dad are in "a better place," though the biblical definitions of how one is admitted to heaven are strange and troubling to me. The God I've come to accept is probably neither mad at my dad nor shaking his/her head at me. Though I can't be absolutely positive about any of that. I have friends who assure me that I can be positive. But how do they *know*? Are they simply hoping that's true for the sake of their own eternity?

And what about Jesus? When I was ten years old, I merrily sang along to the hymns about Holy Ghosts and the Son of God, walking on water, and assorted miracles. But all of that seems a little sketchy and unfathomable to me now. It seems that many of us believe the Bible's story of the life of Jesus only because we've always been told we *had to* believe it, much in the same way that, as children, we're told we *have to* say please and thank you and behave ourselves. But religion isn't manners or rules. It's complicated and personal.

And, like my father, I'm often dismayed by the people who are the most vocally and in-your-face "Christian." These people seem to use their religion to judge, hate, and deny others, all the while presenting themselves as superior and saved because they are "believers." The great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi once commented that so many Christians are so unlike Christ. Truly, it is hard to understand how some people who proudly announce that they center their faith around a man who was the essence of love, kindness, humility, and acceptance can be so totally the opposite of that essence.

Clearly, I'm not alone in the way I feel. Today, weekly church attendance is at an all-time low, and the number of Americans who identify themselves as Christian continues to decline. It is estimated that 60 percent of young people over the age of 16 will disconnect from their church. Naturally, there are the self-righteous churchgoers who shake their fingers and warn that this is a

sign of moral decay in our country. I'm more inclined to think that it is a sign of more and more people questioning, wondering, and being disappointed with the experience of organized religion.

But beyond all the grey areas, disappointments, and questions, there is still a thread of comfort and certainty for me. It's a thread that winds all the way back to my grandmother so many years ago. I think of her knitting, always knitting, things for "the poor children" or speaking kindly to total strangers or being endlessly patient in all situations (the time I decided to paint pictures on the walls with nail polish when I was 4 comes to mind). When I consider that her character and heart was based upon what she read again and again about Jesus, it gives me faith in faith. It *is* real. It *can* work.

In my day-to-day life, I remain uncertain about *who* Jesus really was---the Holy Son who could make wine out of water or simply an amazing man whose love and words inspired people in incredible ways. But I am certain, thanks to my grandmother, that trying to follow what Jesus taught and said is a good thing. I have no doubt that my grandmother's faith made loving her neighbors as herself immensely easier for her than it is for me.

I'll never have a picture in my bathroom of Jesus or read the Bible twenty times. I may never feel comfortable calling myself a Christian. But I do have a sense of what's important in life for all of us, regardless of our varying degrees of faith and belief--*good deeds and joy*.

2 BELIEVE IT OR NOT!

Dawn Coglisier

One of my favorite coffee mugs has the word “Believe” spelled across it in bright orange letters. Each morning when I get to work, I drink out of this inspirational mug. It’s a great mug. It’s pretty big, so it holds a lot. It has a strong, sturdy handle that fits my hand just right.

More than being the perfect container for my morning brew, the mug is a reminder of a topic dear to my heart. I’m someone who talks a lot about faith and the power of belief. I enjoy learning about the faith of others. People observing my actions (not to mention my mug) might assume that I have always had a strong connection to faith. They would be mistaken. In fact, my journey toward defining what I believe has been long and often rocky. It has been crowded with experiences that I am still gathering.

The journey began in my youth, which was filled with chaos and family dysfunction. I spent most of my early childhood in New Jersey in the custody of my paternal grandparents. They identified as Southern Baptist, with a loose connection to the church. They prayed before meals and when life circumstances dictated a need for prayer. But other than a cross on the wall and some Bibles from “back home,” there were not many other signs of religious belief. Things were different when we went on trips “back home,” which meant to Tennessee. Everyone in the family there was heavily into Southern Baptist culture. My Aunt Surry was the choir director and pianist in her small country church. She carried a small Bible with her everywhere she went. Her dresses came below her knees, and she kept her long silver hair pulled back in a neat bun. She was a kind woman, and I always felt at peace around her. When we were in Tennessee, there were church events to attend on an almost daily basis.

During the periods I lived with my mother I was exposed to various denominations, including Methodist, Catholic, and Lutheran. The memories that are clearest are of when I was about 11. During that time, we attended a little Methodist church in a small town in Georgia. I remember that church fondly, not because of any doctrine I was taught, but because of the community among its members. There, I was able to form bonds with other kids my age.

While I valued those relationships, my experience in this house of worship was tainted by the dysfunction in our home. Those Sunday mornings always involved a rush to get to church on time. The hurrying would increase the ever-present tension in the house. Family members screamed at one another. My mother would often be crying. If I started yelling about what was going on, she was likely to smack me across the head. If my stepfather was around and I stepped out of line, as I often did, he would knock me to the ground. He rarely came along to church, and I was happy to leave him behind.

When we arrived at church, we were also expected to leave behind the reality of our lives. We had to smile and act as if everything was perfect. We were not permitted to say or do anything that let anyone know about the ugliness that preceded our arrival. As a result of this hypocrisy, I became furious. During quiet prayer times, I wanted to scream out loud about the lie my family was presenting. I wanted to yell out, “Does God know what is going on in our house?” Moments like these made me begin to wonder about the existence of God.

During the brief periods in my teens when I lived with my father and stepmother, I began thinking about atheism and agnosticism. As far as I know, my father was an atheist. My life experience was already making me question the existence of God. It didn’t make sense to me that a supreme being would allow such suffering, especially for a child. My father’s wife was from a Catholic family and she took us to church and even sent me to religion classes. I don’t remember a thing from those classes, except that I didn’t like them. There was an overtone of

rigidity that frustrated me to no end. The teachers were nuns, and I did not understand these women and how they lived. Later in life, I would end up working for a Catholic organization and became friends with many nuns. I learned to honor their journeys and the work they do. However, as a teen, being forced into Catholicism by a stepmother whom I thought didn't care for me pushed me into a real rebellion phase.

Because of my rocky relationship with my parents, I spent a good amount of time living on the streets. I stayed in runaway shelters, slept in bus stations, camped in the woods, and did a lot of couch surfing. Even though sleeping in the woods left me exposed to the elements, those were the times I felt the strongest spiritual connection. Something about being alone with the forces of nature made me feel grounded, whole, and connected to a power greater than myself.

During one of these times in the woods, I met a girl about my age on a sandy beach deep in the pines. We hit it off and talked for hours. She invited me to her house, which she shared with her mom and grandmother. I was so impressed with their house. It wasn't fancy, but it was cool, natural, and earthy. They used branches for curtain rods, and beautiful rocks here and there for decoration.

The women informed me that they identified as witches. Here was an entire new layer to my growing confusion about faith and belief. They practiced their faith with a small group of other women that they referred to as their "grove." Their sessions together were held in a small, circular area in the woods behind their home. They referred to these gatherings as rituals. I attended several of them and observed nothing but love and kindness. I watched this daughter, mother, and grandmother conduct services that connected people and the earth. These women prayed in their own way to many deities, both male and female, although their primary focus was the Goddess. Their sanctuary was beautifully adorned with trees and wildflowers that changed with the seasons. I was intrigued by the emphasis on nature and the guideline of ensuring no harm to others. Still, as had happened with my exposure to other religions, I was bothered by the formality – by the rules and regulations that were invented by people. I was impressed by much of what these women taught me, although I do not follow their tradition. And I know that, lacking a sense of family, I was drawn to these women's family bond.

By the time I entered adulthood, I had little use for formal religion of any type. I felt bitter towards anyone who attempted to sell me on the "one true path." So I was surprised when a very close friend, who was also definitely down on organized religion, invited me to what she promised was a "different" type of church – a Universal Unitarian (UU) church. Intrigued, I went to UU church with my husband. I was confused from the moment we pulled into the driveway. This house of worship seemed to be inclusive of many faiths – how could all this be under one roof?

The sign outside the church showed a chalice with a flame in it surrounded by symbols of various religions. These symbols included a Christian cross, a Star of David, a Yin Yang, an OM, and a Buddhist symbol. Similar signs of diversity were posted around the sanctuary. The church was a round structure built into the side of the hill. The building wasn't fancy, but it had a sense of warmth and inclusion. Greeters at the door smiled and shook my hand. The rows of seats inside the church curved towards each other, allowing people to look into one another's faces. But what I remember most was the people. There was such diversity! Some were in jeans and tie dye; others were in formal Sunday best. And there were children everywhere. I was struck by the way everyone seemed to accept everyone else. The children were not being ordered to be quiet; they were being embraced for being who they were.

As I read the order of service handed to me at the door, I noticed that this day's event was a "Coming of Age" service, which celebrated the teens in the church that were transitioning to

adulthood. On the back of the pamphlet was a list of principles that guide the Unitarian Universalist church. There were none of the rules and regulations or “you must believe this” statements that had so bothered me about other religious groups. Instead, the list included things like respecting the inherent worth and dignity of others. It went on to mention things such as the importance of social justice, peace, liberty, acceptance, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning!

I was amazed as I read the list. I finally felt at home! No one was trying to convince me that there was one true path. There was respect and encouragement for people to open their minds and their hearts to the journey, both their own and that of others. There were Christians, Jews, Pagans, atheists, and more under one roof, all exploring this world of faith and belief. During the service, the teens stood up and talked about what it meant to them to be members of this community. I cried when a young African American woman, adopted by two Caucasians who were from Catholic and Jewish backgrounds, talked about coming out as gay and how the fellowship had held her with grace and acceptance.

For the first time in my life, in a place of spirituality, I was actually able to say YES! This is what I believe! I had finally found a spiritual home, and I have been a Unitarian since that day. My husband and I have raised our three children as Unitarians and have never had a day of regret.

Being a Unitarian has allowed me the opportunity to explore with an open mind and an open heart, and to enjoy the journey. I no longer seek something that might or might not be. I accept that there are many paths and that there are powers greater than me. I can enjoy the exploration of others' paths and respect their truths while forming and honoring my own. This has been such a healing experience for me. As a Unitarian, I have not only had the opportunity to form a personal faith, but to also expand the facets of what faith should mean in my life. The Unitarian church is filled with beautiful families that might not be accepted in certain faiths. There are families consisting of same-sex couples, interracial families, inter-faith groups, and more. These people are a true representation of our world, rather than the fairytale ideal I was forced to pretend to accept as a child.

Now that I am happily rooted in my spiritual home, I have been able to welcome some tremendous adventures. For example, my family lived for two years on a Navajo reservation. We moved there because I was in graduate school studying to become an advanced practice nurse practitioner. Strengthened by our UU experience, my husband and children and I were able to enter into the life of the “rez” with open minds and hearts. Because of (I believe) our openness, we were honored by being allowed to take part in many traditional ceremonies based on the Navajo faith. I was able to befriend medicine men and women who took their time to educate me on their faith and share their practices with me.

My adult life has been filled with such encounters, some of them brief, but all of them meaningful. Each has added to the beautiful tapestry that is the blanket of faith I wrap around myself to this day. I have walked on mountaintops and talked with Tibetan Lamas. I have attended drum circles in celebration of Orisha. I have learned healing rituals from hoodoo practitioners, and I have held hands in prayer circles with Christian outreach workers ministering to the homeless. I have danced in the forest with Druids and celebrated the feast of the seven fishes with Catholics. I have attended weddings in ornate cathedrals, and, sitting on a dirt floor, I have celebrated the traditional Navajo wedding of a Navajo groom and his New York wife. I have prayed on my knees in front of an altar bedecked with three large Buddhas. I have held prayer sitting on a rock by a river under the moon. Each experience and each prayer has had one thing in common – gratitude for the life I have been given and the experiences that have filled it.

Looking back at my life's journey, I am so grateful that I have had experiences with people of diverse beliefs from all over this beautiful world. I have walked away richer from each conversation. I still giggle when someone asks me if I will pray with them because they assume I am of their religion. And I *will* pray with them. My prayer will most likely be to a different source, but the intent is the same. Every day, I pray for tolerance and understanding for myself, my family, and all those we encounter. As I learned that first day I walked into the Unitarian Universalist church, I pray that everyone will come to understand the importance of individual journeys and to respect the inherent worth of every person.

I am finally able to say that, yes, I am spiritually at peace. I have found comfort in the thought that for me, having belief does not mean that I identify a God. I am no longer bound by the need to fit into the mold of a particular religion. I am most at peace when I am living, and teaching my children to live, in harmony with the principles set forth in the Unitarian Universalist faith. This does not mean I pray to any set god or goddess. Neither does it mean that I deny their existence. It means that for today, I do not have to accept any manmade doctrine in order to "believe." I believe there is a power greater than I. On some days, that is the magnificent power of the elements of nature. On other days, it is the nurturing of the female divine, expressed as Mother Mary or Yemanja. And on some days, it is the more masculine, yet gentle, force of a Buddha.

I learn from others what they believe and how that fills them with peace. I do not need to convince them that *my* way is right. This acceptance of others only strengthens my faith. I am more whole at this point than I ever thought I would be. I am filled with certainty that my faith, like my life, will be constantly evolving. I am okay knowing that I do not need to define my spirituality. To know that there is an energy, a life force, and a power greater than me is enough.

This is my path to wholeness. And as my favorite coffee mug reminds me, in its bold orange print, the most important part is to simply "Believe."

3 HOW GOD WORKS

George Mattmiller

It took a funeral to wake me up. I thank God the memorial service wasn't for me. In retrospect, it had every right to be.

An adoring crowd gathered in the sunlit chapel on the manicured grounds of Pinion Acres retirement community. For years, Pinion had been a prominent advertiser on KWBB, the television station where I worked. We were now celebrating the life of Annabel Hopkins, the facility's de facto spokesperson, who lived to be a charismatic 102. Annabel had become an icon on Channel-36 because we used her in the closing shot of every Pinion Acres spot, cheerfully lifting a crystal water glass to the camera in a frail though heartfelt toast.

I fidgeted, wondering if this affair was ever going to end. As a rule, I didn't attend funerals. Why had they felt the need to schedule it in the middle of the day? Didn't they know people had to work? Then I realized that most of these people had stopped working during the Hoover administration. I scanned the room for Nadine Chatham, the Executive Director. My goal was to let her know I had a place in my heart for the elderly in hopes of continuing the station's lucrative advertising contract—but Nadine was nowhere to be found.

It was time for family and friends to offer tributes. Prospects for a quick end to this shindig were bright, as no one made a beeline for the podium. Then a big guy buttoned his suit coat as he walked stiffly to the lectern. This didn't look good.

"I'm gonna make this short and sweet." The rugged man stood 6'3", appeared about 50, and spoke with a husky drawl. "Some of us may have met before. My name is Willis Hopkins. You all knew my grandmother to varying degrees, but the common denominator is she loved you all dearly, each and every one of you. I learned a lot from Grams over the years, but nothing as important as building your relationship with God."

My heart sank. Here I thought we were getting off scot-free and now he was dragging God into the picture.

"I think you'll all agree...none of us is walking out of this life alive." Leaning forward at the podium, Willis set his rock-hard jaw and scanned the crowd. "This is all going to happen to each and every one of us at some point. We're all going to die a physical death, and then it will come down to our relationship with God. That's the only thing we're taking with us from this earth. Do I have an amen?"

As some among the Pinion Acres faithful warbled "amen," I squirmed in my padded chair. This service had suddenly grown excruciatingly long to the point of being obnoxious, but Willis couldn't care less.

"If you died and went to meet the Lord this very instant, what would you have to say for yourself?" He gripped the edges of the podium. "Upon our physical death, we are all going to meet God, and we're all going to give an account of our lives. What will your account look like? Did you spend your life loving God and serving His people the way Christ taught? Or maybe you spent your life mocking Him and shaking your fist at Him. Or will you admit to avoiding and ignoring Him, taking Him for granted, saying Christ is fine for some, just not me?"

I broke into a cold sweat; everything started moving in slow-motion. The dude bored a double-gauge reality check straight through me.

He was right, of course. I didn't have a thing to say to the God of the Universe, Maker of Heaven and Earth...Maker of *me*. I'd led my life the way I saw fit, taking God for granted when things were going good and railing at Him when things were headed south. I considered Him an impediment to my happiness, someone—or something—to just be gotten out of the way so I could go on living my life in conformance with my own homegrown desires and goals.

Willis Hopkins was strangely at peace. “John 3:16 states: ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.’” Then he nodded at me. “Physically, our bodies have an expiration date—but our souls don’t. Your soul will live forever...and it will reside in the presence of God for eternity or apart from Him for eternity. Where do you stand on this most crucial aspect of your life?”

That did it! This guy had crossed the line. I would have wrenched from my seat and stormed out if it wouldn’t have caused a scene. Plus, some of these people were actually into it!

Willis Hopkins lowered the boom: “Who is Christ anyway? A worthy teacher? A fine man, a good role model? He is all of that to be sure, but most of all He is our Lord and Savior. God loves each of us—every man, women and child who ever lived—with a love we can’t begin to comprehend. But he also despises our sinful nature. Jesus died on the cross, a divine sacrifice at the intersection of God’s love of man and His hatred of sin, and through God’s grace and mercy, we emerge as benefactors of this most selfless act in all history. Benefactors, if we accept what was done on our behalf.”

It was a long drive home. I was doing a slow burn. This guy had torched me in ways I wasn’t even aware of. In the ensuing weeks, I feverishly read and reread the Bible to discredit all this bunk and to show what an outdated instrument it was; those who subscribed to its wrongheaded tenets were, in my estimation, delusional dopes. The result was just the opposite. Over the next six months, the more I read, the more I yearned to know. I started attending a neighborhood church, hoping to trip up the pastor. Instead, I was asked to teach one of the adult education classes. I attended faith-based seminars and biblical conferences, realizing I had more in common with professing Christians whom I’d just met than with secular friends I’d known a lifetime.

While all of this was going on, my life was changing in myriad ways—some more perceptible than others. Movies, TV shows, and topics of conversation that had once excited me no longer held my interest. These pursuits were not inherently wrong or evil—they just no longer furthered my goals in life. I began praying that each day I would come closer to Christ, and to thank Him profusely and continually for what He did for me on the cross.

As I ultimately found out, once you accept Jesus into your life as Lord and Savior, everything changes. And if you humbly confess your sins and sincerely turn from them, all is forgiven.

I didn’t think any of this was possible. But at the same time, I realized I didn’t want to die without acknowledging my indebtedness to a loving Lord Jesus who went to the cross and died a terrible death for me. Since then, I have developed a simple yet powerful purpose in life: to live all the remainder of my days in focused preparation for that monumentally majestic, spectacular meeting with God Almighty, the God of the Universe, that will last for all eternity.

It took a lady 102 years of age to bring the most important thing in life to my attention. And that’s how God works.

In my industry, depending on whom you ask, it takes between seven and 18 impressions to trigger the “buy” mechanism in response to a television commercial. In other words, people need to be exposed to your message, on average, that many times before they make a decision to purchase what you’re selling. At the risk of sounding mercenary, the Gospel is really not that much different. I don’t know how many tracts, street preachers, church services, and friends’ testimonies I’d encountered before the Good News of the Gospel finally hit home at Annabel Hopkins’ funeral on that fateful spring day in 1997.

I remember back in the '80's working as a board operator at a television station in Anchorage, Alaska. We were airing a special for Billy Graham, and during an interview the reporter asked Dr. Graham about Heaven. Without hesitation, the storied evangelist asserted that he was going to Heaven to be with the Lord once he died. What struck me was his utter, riveting confidence. There was no wavering, no backtracking. He didn't qualify his statement by saying "I don't know, I *hope* I go to Heaven..." No, he just flat-out announced he was going there. How could he be so sure? Wasn't that a bit presumptuous? It haunted me for the longest time.

Many years later I traveled to Billy Graham's Crusade in Queens, New York. It was a sweltering weekend in late June. I attended both Saturday and Sunday services. Figuring it was Dr. Graham's last major event, I wasn't going to be denied. Even though I'd already given my life to Christ, I responded to altar calls both days. If there was ever a foretaste of Heaven this was it. Billy Graham, the closest voice to God on earth, led us forward in prayer while one of the headliners sang the seminal invitational hymn "Just As I Am." Moving in a sea of people on the wings of the Holy Spirit, it made the concept of eternal Paradise close enough to touch.

What happened to change my life so radically? It was a long and circuitous road, let me tell you. I was born into a loving Christian family in the USA, a country founded on Judeo-Christian values. Soon, though, the wheels came off; in what amounted to a dose of spiritual self-medication I excused myself from Sunday school at the tender age of 10. I just didn't see how men in sandals strolling the desert a hundred million years ago related to me. Still, I had managed to retain the Christian brand throughout the decades and attended church religiously twice a year: Christmas Eve and Easter. So did that make me a Christian? Of course it did, through and through. What was I going to call myself, for crying out loud--a *Latter-Day Buddhist*?

During what amounted to my "dark-hearted period," the treatment I afforded God was nothing short of abhorrent. I was fond of boxing Him in, demeaning Him, questioning His existence and mocking Him. Laughably, I considered myself more sophisticated than the Creator. At one point I was writing screenplays in Hollywood featuring racy characters and chaotic plotlines that all but spit in the face of the Almighty. No matter; He was a little slow on the uptake anyway and would never be able to wrap His wrinkled head around my dazzling story arcs. I regularly went on an "*Angry God*" rant in which I proudly postulated that a loving God would *never* brutalize His Son on the cross in such a horrifically savage, barbaric way.

Oddly, when I was spouting these reckless, baseless assertions, I had no idea just how badly Jesus was torn up on the cross. It was much worse than I could have ever imagined. During the scourging session, His back, chest, buttocks and legs were ripped open by animalistic Roman soldiers who carved His flesh into ribbons during an absolutely ruinous display of carnal bloodlust. The depraved tormentors wielded sadistically customized cat-o'-nine-tails whose leather ends were fitted with shards of glass, metal and seashells to accentuate the "grab" factor. With blood spurting from severed arteries and bowels literally hanging out of His body, it was no wonder Jesus could barely make it up the Via Dolorosa, staggering beneath the weight of the 110-pound cross strapped to his lacerated shoulders. Consider if this had happened today: Jesus would be rushed to the nearest trauma center suffering from shock due to excessive blood loss. He would be placed in intensive care and receive microsurgical wound treatment, soft tissue repair, aggressive fluid replenishment, and massive blood transfusions. Even with all that, the threat of kidney failure and infection would make the chance for survival highly remote.

But Jesus' impassioned ordeal was just beginning. He was then nailed to the cross with tapered wrought iron spikes that were between five and seven inches in length. I have held nails that approximated the ones used to secure the Savior to the cross. They may not be as imposing as railroad spikes, but you still don't want them hammered through your flesh. Those

administering the punishment weren't exactly skilled clinical technicians; they were bloodthirsty mongrels, intent on exacting as much pain as possible from their victim. It didn't matter if the hooligans crushed bone, severed arteries, sliced ligaments and mangled nerves. When they finally managed to raise Jesus upright on the cross, the earth's most regal and important inhabitant was reduced to a slab of bloody hamburger meat—and the worst was yet to come.

Death by crucifixion involves suffocation. You literally drown in your own bodily fluids that collect in the chest cavity. In some cases, crucifixion takes days. With Jesus it took but hours—accelerated by the shock of being totally separated from God. As Jesus bore the weight of the world's sins on His bloody back, His Father could no longer stand to watch. God's beloved Son had become a vassal of unthinkable iniquity. It was tantamount to dumping Michelangelo's *David* into a septic tank. Yet when all was said and done, the end result was the most selfless act of compassion in the history of mankind—and God did it for you and me.

This was anything but the “Angry God” syndrome. It was all about pure, unfiltered, undefiled, unabashed, unadulterated love; a love we can't begin to comprehend, define, measure, or understand. God loves us so much He sent His Son into this toxic mosh pit to stand between us and the screaming, highballing, inbound freight train of sin. We cannot even remotely decipher the dynamics that went into making this redemptive plan a reality. All we can do is say “thank you,” realizing that God's heart was crushed in the unspeakable, supernatural process during which His Son became sin for us.

To this day, I still feel sorrow for all the insults and mockery I heaped on God during the years I strayed from Him. But the good part is, once I confessed these sins and repented of them, He forgave me for everything. The proverbial slate was wiped clean and the relationship was—and is—allowed to grow infinitely stronger and deeper.

And that's how God works.

In the rollicking bouillabaisse of yesteryear, I was intimate with women of all different persuasions, faiths and national origins. I actually thought I was doing God a favor by bringing the world closer together in a kind of a half-baked United Nations milieu. When I look back at the debauchery, the carousing, the arrogance, and bold entitlement, I chide myself for lacking self-control. That's what's known as being convicted by the Holy Spirit. You'll find that the closer you get to God, the more these convictions sting. It tends to make you think twice next time before doing something that might end up being offensive to God.

Don't think for one minute I have it all dialed in and that I'm triumphantly gliding on a magic carpet toward the bejeweled gates of perfection. I'm still thumping along with patches on my tires and every so often—seemingly when I least expect it—I hit a pothole and suffer a blowout. But you know something? God understands. That's where grace and mercy enter the picture, the twin pillars of His undying, unconditional love for us. Grace and mercy represent virtues we don't deserve but are gifts God freely proffers. Eternal wrath, on the other hand, is a worthy punishment well suited to our sins—yet God refrains from meting out the thunderous pummeling due to one reason and one reason only: Jesus Christ.

The most seminal question in the whole of Creation—and spanning all eternity—comes down to this: do we have Jesus Christ in our lives? As much as God clearly, dearly, and purely loves us, He hates sin to an equally intense degree. There is no such thing as giving our soul a sponge bath—it needs to be power-washed with a pressurized frenzy that defies all human rationale. And there is only One who can administer it: Jesus Christ. By inviting Jesus into our lives, we clothe ourselves in His glorious regal splendor. By gratefully accepting the redemptive

work He performed on the cross, we fully assume His identity. At the point of physical death, therefore, God sees Jesus when He gazes upon our souls; it is the radiant reflection of Christ that shields our otherwise unspeakably hideous, sin-riddled existences.

So really...who is Jesus? The children's hymn, released in the 1860's, says it all: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." He's your best friend, your big brother, the one who raced from His Father's right-hand side in Heaven to secure your rescue. That's right, He came for you and me to deliver us from the lethal hellhole we invariably create for ourselves—even if we don't give Him the time of day. *You don't need rescuing you say?* Try this on for size: it's like you set the house afire and you can't put it out. You don't know how it happened but you're sure it wasn't your fault. When the fire department shows up, you deny them access. The place is a mess—you would have cleaned up first if you thought you'd be having company. Does that sound familiar? Is that indicative of how things are between God and you as a general rule?

On the third day after dying that horrific death on the cross, Jesus ascended into Heaven to be restored to His Father. In so doing, He changed the course of civilization forever, exploding the shackles of sin and death that had imprisoned the entirety of mankind since Adam and Eve's fateful transgression in the Garden of Eden. No other religious leader in the history of this planet can claim they were resurrected from the dead. Moreover, what Jesus did on the cross paved the way for restoration of our right relationship with God. By proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Savior, people place their faith and trust in a loving, *living* God as personified by the impassioned work of His sacrificial Son on the cross.

To sum it all up, the original seed must first be interred before it can sprout to life as a towering tree. That's the whole point of what Jesus did for you and me.

And that's how God works.

So... here we are: the end of the line. The train pulls into the station and it's time to get off. If you've ventured this far without jumping ship, maybe God is talking to you.

I'm not the kind of guy who goes running around ramming religion down peoples' throats. However, something did in fact happen to me that I feel compelled to share. Indeed, everything about me has radically changed since Jesus came into my life.

We were all created in God's image. It is said that each one of us has a hole in our soul that only God can fill. Sure, we try plugging it with all the usual suspects: booze, drugs, extravagant vacations, fancy cars, bank accounts, powerful job titles, impressive college degrees, trophy spouses, camera-ready children, and pedigreed pets. You know the drill. The list goes on and on. A relationship with God does not cost a dime, but we prefer pouring all these substitutes into our bodies and throwing all kinds of flimsy solutions at the problem when the answer all along is the One who started it all: God Almighty.

God loves everyone on Earth with a raw, haunting, exquisite power and gloriously desires each and every one of us to join Him in Heaven. Think of the vividly spectacular colors that await; the waterfalls of music and laughter of birds--we cannot even begin to remotely imagine the vast majestic horizon of hope sweeping across the infinite tapestry. However, if we deny God and reject Him out of hand, we're sending a message. And the end result will be eternal separation. Call it Hell if you want; it's the last thing God desires for us. But if we don't want anything to do with Him in this life, He'll give us precisely what we desire--even though it breaks His heart.

So it's your choice. You can embrace God your eternal Father, reconciled through the blood of Jesus Christ shed freely on the cross for you...or you can deny Him and live in a foggy

anxiety about the final meeting between you and the Almighty. At the end of the line, after all is said and done, life as we know it will be finished and our permanent address for all eternity will either be magnificently blooming—or tragically wilting. Which will it be for you?

The ball is in your court. And if this essay has started you thinking about your eternal salvation...then that's how God works!

4 THIS I BELIEVE

Tonya Lapido

To write about my belief in a loving God, I must first share with you my beliefs about marriage and children. I never wanted to get married and I never wanted to have kids. This first thing you need to know about me is that I never wanted to have kids, and I never wanted to get married. *Never*. I grew up with parents who loved me dearly, but because they seemed to have trouble between themselves, I quickly decided that the whole marriage and kids thing wasn't for me. I figured I could make enough trouble all by myself, so why bring a man and kids into the picture?

Throughout my childhood, people always told me I would change my mind when I got older. Once I hit my twenties and didn't change my mind, I was told that I'd feel differently when I met someone special. When I did, in fact, meet someone special, I was still absolutely determined to remain alone. He was a funny, brilliant, kind man who wanted to know me, but I said No. However, he was persistent and eventually we started dating. At one point, I actually tried to end the relationship. It was happening too quickly and that terrified me. I preferred being in control, and not being in control was not part of my plan.

Nonetheless, over time I realized that I loved him and actually wanted to be with him for the rest of my life---but I still didn't want to marry him. After all, what we had was really good, perfect even, and why mess with perfection? But then *something* shifted inside of me and I wanted to publicly declare that he and I had chosen each other and wanted to spend our lives together.

"Isn't that marriage?" he asked me. I had to agree that it was.

So we got married and bought a big 5-bedroom house, but neither of us had any desire to have kids. Several years passed, and even our parents stopped asking when we were going to have children. I loved my husband, I loved my new home, and I couldn't be happier.

And then a good friend had a baby boy she named Jonah. I had watched my friend's pregnancy progress, attended her baby shower, and never had any desire to experience what my friend was experiencing. A few days after Jonah was born we went to meet him. Despite my many protests, his father plopped Jonah into my nervous and inexperienced arms. As the father took Jonah back into his own arms, I watched him look tenderly at Jonah. And I had a visceral moment of knowing that I was watching a father fall in love with his son.

And a voice in my head said: *Why would I not want that feeling in my life?*

Those words startled me. Where did they come from? I couldn't possibly want a child. Yet the words lingered. It was terrifying, confusing, and it shook me to my core. I spent months grappling with it. How could I possibly want a child? My husband didn't want children. Was this going to end our marriage? It was a scary few months before I finally broached the subject of children with my husband. After that, I read books. I went back to therapy. I thought through every possible angle of this new perspective. And in the end, the logical conclusion was that I had changed my mind---I wanted a child.

My husband had watched me wrestling with this decision, so by the time I spoke up he had already thought it through himself. For the next few months, we talked about what we were thinking and feeling, and we finally came to the decision that we would have a child. We gave ourselves a full year of preparing our minds, bodies, and bank accounts before we began trying to conceive. We researched and found a midwifery practice even before we were pregnant. We were ready. When we reached the agreed upon "start month," we were successful on the first try. Everything was going exactly according to plan.

And then it wasn't.

Our baby miscarried at 10 weeks. I was dumbfounded. I scoured the internet to understand why and how this could have happened. I stayed up late at night reading articles and blog posts about miscarriages. I was hurt and in disbelief. I'd skipped over reading about miscarriages when we were planning the pregnancy because I believed it wasn't relevant to me. After all, I was healthy and young. However, I came to learn that having a miscarriage, while a sad experience, was a common occurrence. I took comfort in knowing that we could try for pregnancy again as soon as we wanted. I was heartbroken, but I was ready to try again.

When I became pregnant the second time, my husband and I shared a cautious joy. The first pregnancy had been a sad moment in our plan to become parents; surely this time would be different. But 7 weeks later, the pregnancy miscarried again. *Again*. Typically, when it came to anger, I could go from zero to sixty in half a second. But for some reason, this devastating loss didn't make me angry or make me want to blame someone. I didn't blame myself. I didn't blame my husband. I was just broken---and in darkness.

And it was in this darkness that my belief in God became active and real. As broken as I felt, I simultaneously felt loved and comforted. During this time, I felt very close to my husband and very secure in our marriage. Though I was crying multiple times a day, I also had a sense that somehow I would be okay, even if it meant that I couldn't birth children. I didn't know how or when I'd be okay, but I knew I would. It was in that darkness that I came to know that I was loved by God.

The midwives told us to stop trying to conceive and to come in for testing. One miscarriage is a common occurrence, but two miscarriages may indicate that there is a problem. My husband and I had already been intimate, but we arranged for testing the following week. Over the weekend, prior to the testing, I felt off. I couldn't eat and the smell of food made me nauseous---all common early signs of pregnancy.

We took a pregnancy test and it was positive, again. *Here we go* I thought. *Another pregnancy. Another miscarriage*. The midwives arranged for me to have an ultrasound at 11 weeks. There was nothing to do but wait. Initially, I thought that waiting until the 11th week would drive me crazy. But I wasn't excited or terrified or worried because I was consumed with morning sickness. I was so sick every day that I started waking up 30 minutes early in order to have time to be sick, lie down on the bathroom floor, and then get ready for work. My body forced me to be so present and focused in the moment that I had no time to worry.

Early one morning, I fell asleep on the bathroom floor after throwing up. I was tired and sick and exhausted before the day had even begun. But then I suddenly opened my eyes because a presence had reassured me that everything was going to be okay. When it was finally time for the ultrasound appointment, I felt more certain of the pregnancy. The darkness simply wasn't there anymore. Not only was the darkness gone, but it had been replaced with a knowledge that all was well in my soul and in my body. The darkness had been replaced by faith, and I hadn't even noticed it happening.

The 11th-week ultrasound not only confirmed that all was well with the pregnancy but that we were having identical twins! My pregnancy was categorized as high risk because of the babies' shared placenta and the previous miscarriages. As all of the risks and the concerns were explained, I was calm and not at all anxious. And as the babies grew inside of me, I became more certain that they would be healthy and that there was nothing to worry about. This certainty was not something that I *thought*; it was a deep knowledge that I *felt*. God had spoken. And I had finally listened. I had finally let go of the control I had always thought I needed to have.

When I experienced my daughters being born and watched them looking at me upon entering this world, I saw the face of God. All the joy, love, and kindness that had been put into

these two little bodies was for me to treasure. The clarity of my purpose in life now was razor sharp. I was to raise them to know God and to be who God created them to be.

The journey of my developing faith began before I was aware of it. It predates the birth of children I didn't know that I wanted or needed. It predates the miscarriages. It predates the marriage that I never wanted. God was there all along, guiding me toward the love I was resisting.

And as I reflect on the many ways that God has shown up in my life, it has always been with and through love. Love has been my path to God and has formed my belief in this world. Christianity is the story and religious tradition that helps me to practice my faith. But I'm a strong believer that there are many different paths to God and that the most important thing isn't *how* you get there, but that you do indeed get there.

When I began writing this essay, I was sure that the focus was going to be on the miscarriages and the way I found God through them. But, really, this is an essay about love and the incredible, overpowering, all-encompassing emotion that God places in each one of us. In my journey and relationship with God, I have come to believe a number of things:

God is within each of us. When we are born, a piece of God is put into each of us. Our job is to treasure and honor that piece of God within us and within others.

God is always present. If God is in each of us, then God is everywhere and in every living thing---in every person, the ocean, the forest, and the sunshine. Wherever you are and wherever you turn, God is there waiting for you and wanting a relationship with you.

God gives us the superpowers we need to accomplish our purpose in life. We are all born with special gifts unique to us. God wants us to be who we were created to be, not who others tell us to be (or not to be). I spent many years not showing my female sensitivities and vulnerabilities for fear of being thought of as weak. It wasn't until birthing and raising two girls that I began to see my sensitivities as superpowers that help make me who I am. Rather than spend my energy covering them up, I now spend energy unclocking the goodness of me.

Faith comes to us through surrender and vulnerability. Throughout the darkness and throughout my third pregnancy, I heard and felt God talking to me. I felt His love, His comfort, and His plans for me. I'm smart and very capable. I can do most things I set my mind to. Had I not been so broken and vulnerable, I wouldn't have heard Him. I had to stop believing I was always in control in order to know God. This isn't true for everyone, but it was true for me. I had to be placed a situation I couldn't think my way out of in order to truly surrender and allow faith into my life.

More than a decade has passed since my heart first shifted toward wanting children. As I look back on my journey toward God through the loves of my life, I see the many ways my heart was changed to desire what God had in store for me. I am so grateful that God is in control and guiding my life, because it is so much better than what I had planned for myself.

5 MY PERSONAL FAITH

Ayesha Rahman

Warm sunshine is seeping through the bamboo blinds and making fragmented patterns on the cold mosaic floor of our balcony. I can hear the neighborhood children shout as someone scores another goal. I desperately want to go out and play. My tiny feet are dangling from our smallest wicker patio chair with restless anticipation as I am waiting for the clock to hit 3:00 p.m. My *huzoor* (Arabic instructor), who seems exhausted, is sitting across from me, holding a cane, with his eyes half closed as I recite my Arabic alphabets. *Alif Ba Ta Sa Jim Ha Kha* (the Arabic letters) echo everywhere. My huzoor's head flops forward and his cane slips from his hand as he dozes on and off. Every five to ten minutes he wakes up with a jerk and grips his cane more firmly. The clock seems to have stopped.

This was my first acquaintance with religion of Islam. Needless to say, it wasn't a pleasant one.

In the early 80s, almost every household in Bangladesh, where I lived, had a family huzoor. A huzoor is a title of respect that was given to an Arabic instructor. When I say instructor, I don't mean a licensed teacher or a scholar in Islam. A huzoor was merely a person educated in a local Madrasa (a specifically Islamic educational institution), and was a *Hafiz*, meaning he or she had the Quran memorized.

My memory of the countless huzuors I had over the course of my childhood is of their nasal monotones humming the Quran in Arabic, without ever explaining or translating the verses. And almost all of them stank and had bad breath. Muslim children back then were expected to learn the Arabic alphabet, learn to spell in Arabic, and then recite the Quran at least once in their lifetimes. And the stinky huzoor was there to make this mandatory task easier. Most of us did eventually reach the point where we could recite the Quran like a parrot. We recited it at least once in our lifetimes and then forgot all about it. We all knew we had to do get over with it, and we did, unquestioned.

Growing up, the only person I knew who was a devout Muslim in my family was my grandmother. I don't remember ever seeing her without her long string of crystal prayer beads. She prayed five times a day, and her house was like a shelter where people in need were allowed to stay for as long as they pleased. Cats too! She had stray cats and kittens loitering all around her house, licking milk from an unlimited free refill bowl. That, I believe, is why I associated Allah or religion, and everything that comes with it, with old age and charity. I grew up believing Allah was sought in the loneliest of places and the neediest of hearts.

In my immediate family, the presence of Allah was palpable but never imposed. I don't recall my parents praying when I was growing up. I was never asked not to do something because it went against Islam. The kinds of clothes I chose to wear or the time I got back home at night were never called into question. My friends, my boyfriend, and my sister's string of boyfriends were not only welcome in our house but were on great terms with my mother. Verses from Quran were discussed over dinner the same way Literature or Art or Science was.

Were my parents agnostics or, better yet, atheists? No, I wouldn't say so. We went to *Milads* (prayer meetings) hosted by family members regularly. My favorite part of the Milad was the sprinkling of cold rose water on a hot day. It had a calming, soothing comfort. So did the pervading smell of incense. One of my mother's everyday rituals was turning on all the lights after the sun went down and lighting incense. She said it was to shun bad spirits. She also chanted "*Ya Salamu*" when I got sick—a verse from the Quran that is supposed to heal all kinds of ailments. She would hover over my head and say "*Ya Salamu*" a hundred times, and I would feel better almost instantly.

We also celebrated both Eids rather flamboyantly. The two Eids are the most important religious festivals in Islam. First comes Eid-al-Fitr—this Eid is a holiday that celebrates the conclusion of the 29 or 30 days of dawn-to-sunset fasting during the month of Ramadan (the holy month of fasting). And the end of the Hajj (annual pilgrimage to Makkah), Muslims throughout the world celebrate the other Muslim holiday which is Eid al-Adha (*festival of sacrifice*). During the celebration of this Eid, Muslims commemorate Abraham's trials and honor his willingness to sacrifice his son. They do so by slaughtering an animal such as a sheep, camel, cow, or goat. The meat from the sacrificed animal is usually divided into three parts. The family that pays for the sacrificial animal retains one third of the share; another third is given to friends, family, and neighbors; and the remaining third is given to the poor and needy.

I remember the slaughters on Eid mornings—the butcher with a special machete slashing the throat of the expensive cow or goat while reciting a prayer under his breath. I remember how the sacrificial beast would fall to the ground, squirming and then finally letting go with abject indifference. Then there was a communal meat distribution—not a soul in sight went home without a pack of meat.

And there was also collective blood—ripples of cascading blood flowed from the backyards or front porches of each and every household in the county. It flowed onto the streets and into the drains. A lot of scrubbing with bleach followed to get rid of the stench. I never flinched when the meat was served at the table. I hogged it all down. Sensitivity isn't encouraged in Third World countries. Emotions, social changes, psychological impacts, and traumas were not things one talked about back then in Bangladesh. I didn't know how to feel about the fallen cow early in the Eid mornings. But I remember the gush of blood made me silent. It gave me shivers.

Then a few years later, 9/11 happened. My mother and I were on a plane on our way to New York City when the two planes hit the Twin Towers. Our plane was diverted to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we had to stay for four nights before we were allowed to enter New York City. Red and blue lights of police vans flashed and flickered, sniffer dogs ran to and fro, and policemen patrolled the airport of Halifax. We, the passengers, stood there in stunned rows without the slightest idea of what had happened and what was going to happen next.

That night we learned what really happened and who the "terrorists" were, and I learned that the world would never be the same again. The TV news showed footage of the hijacked planes that carried out the attack. Clippings were also shown of the World Trade Center buildings; the magnificent structures were now reduced to ashes with all those thousands of souls perishing with them. At the same time, interviews were aired of people cursing and swearing at Muslims---now a synonym for terrorists.

The grief that I felt then stemmed from twin tragedies: the loss of innocent lives in New York and the indictment of all Muslims in general. Hundreds of millions of Muslims had nothing to do with terrorism, and they grieved with the loved ones of innocent victims of the vicious attack. However, fingers were now pointed at Muslims all over the world. Hatred was everywhere I looked.

I failed to see justice in accusing and convicting all Muslims at the court of public opinion without the benefit of defense. The religion I thought I knew so well was one that did not condone violence and that believed in universal brotherhood, equality, and peace among all humankind. I could not comprehend how an apparent majority of Americans would define an entire religion as brutal, immoral, and unethical as the result of the horrific actions of a few individuals. The event of 9/11 made me realize how easy it was for a minority to become a scapegoat. I knew that no matter how hard I tried to blend in, I'd stand out because I was a Muslim. And for too many Americans, I had become the "other"---the enemy.

Maybe it was because my mother and I both have distinct Pakistani features that give away our religion, or maybe it's because of our skin color, but that one month stay in NY proved to be eye-opening. Family members constantly suggested that we stay indoors, friends considered changing their last names, and Muslim immigrants that we knew sorted out their life's savings to move to Canada.

My entire belief system, not just as a Muslim but as a human, was upended. I remember a drive back home from a family dinner in a restaurant when our car was chased by another car. Two twenty-something white males, one in the driver's seat and the other in the passenger's seat, were cursing us at the top of their lungs. I still remember the hatred in their eyes. They had their middle fingers sticking out of the windows as their car was zooming past ours in an attempt to block our way and stop us. A police siren made them take another route. But before they left us alone, they wished death upon us and asked to leave "their home." We did leave after our month-long visit, but I was to return a few years later to attend college in New York City.

As a Muslim, as a woman, as an international student from a Third World country, I was in dire need of my individual identity. I attended seminars held by Muslim scholars and I went to mosques to listen to *khutbahs* (public preaching in Islam). It seemed I was bent on proving something—proving to a vast majority that the act of a few Muslim individuals did not boil down to all of "us" being bad.

I knew that I loved NYC. I loved the energy it exuded. I indulged in the vigor and the life tumbling out of every street corner of the city. And I didn't want anybody to think badly of me, a Muslim, an international student from a poor country, loving the same things just as much as my non-Muslim, local classmates. I wanted to be "them"--- and yet also "me." I contemplated wearing the *hijab* (a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women) because I thought it was liberating and an in-your-face protest to all the discrimination and hostility that was going on against Muslims. But the illusion of freedom that I imagined would come from wearing a hijab dispelled when I realized how the headscarf was considered in most Muslim communities. It was seen as the sole indicator of whether a Muslim woman was good or bad. A woman's absolute moral fabric was wrongly gauged by the fabric she chose to cover her head with.

I wanted Islam to be the religion that accepted, forgave, included, and loved. But I realized that what it actually did was separate, ostracize, and scare. To start with, the forbidden list in Islam excluded the things I included the most in my life. My best friend from college was a lesbian. She introduced me to LGBT groups who were doing dynamic work in the fields of arts and literature. Being friends with her was like opening new doors—she took me to lesbian concerts and poetry readings that eventually got me interested in gender roles studies. In turn, these studies later acquainted me with numerous writers and performers.

I majored in English Literature, and my final thesis was on gender roles, which was part and parcel of embracing what was forbidden in Islam. I will always be thankful for the decision that I made at that time—to reject the religion of Islam then and there in my life. I also couldn't rid myself of my 200+ heavy metal playlist of songs because music was considered bad in Islam. I ate at McDonalds. I wasn't a teetotaler. The image of blood slithering down our front porch on Eid mornings still made me uncomfortable. I knew that there was still a lot of anger inside of me regarding the 9/11 New York City trip and the injustice of attacks on Muslims. But I also knew that reinforcing my Muslim roots was definitely not my answer.

My parents are devout Muslims now. My father has a beard and quotes the Quran as the word of God and not as a work of literature. My mother prays five times a day. They are old now. I do not understand their need to come close to Allah, but I do understand the need to have something to believe in when all four of your children and their children are in different parts of the world, and you aren't left with much. I can't picture myself in their shoes. Not yet.

I am not the kind of person a devout Muslim family would invite over dinner. I get frowned upon by Muslim family members for not praying, for baring my legs, and for plopping my daughter onto my husband's lap once every day so that I can renew myself in the bar in our family garage with a bottle of wine. I always close the blinds to hide the bar the minute a family member calls me on Skype. We have unholy images and objects strewn all over our house—images of naked women, Buddha statuettes, and posters of The Joker.

I don't recite the Quran to my daughter; I read Dr. Seuss to her instead. "One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish, some are sad, some are glad, some are very very bad," is more relatable, I believe, than "In The name of Allah, the most Gracious, the most merciful Master of the day of Judgment." I don't mean to say that we don't teach our daughter right from wrong; we do teach her about the importance of love, compassion, empathy, and charity. We just don't feel the Quran is the right apparatus to get these messages across. There are more accessible books that teach important values and do not include the Quran's fear of burning in hell.

My husband and I have countless debates over organic versus processed meat and health food stores versus regular grocery stores, but never once have we argued over Halal and Haram meat—meat that is permissible or not in Islam depending on how the animal is slaughtered. I am constantly reminded by my Muslim friends to say "Mash Allah," meaning "Allah has willed it" when boasting about my precocious daughter. I don't eat pork only because I am health-conscious, and I badly want a Toni Morrison quote tattooed on my right thigh.

My impression is that there is no such concept as a "non-practicing" Muslim in Islam. A Muslim is obliged to adhere to the teachings of Islam and perform all the obligatory duties. She/he must also avoid that which has been forbidden. There is no middle ground. I do not perform my Muslim duties, and neither do I plan to any time soon. Does that make me an atheist or an infidel? Perhaps. Islam hasn't proven to me anything of spiritual value in my life. To me, it is something I inherited from my parents, as they did from theirs. I do not, in any way, believe in a higher power or life after death. I believe in this life and I believe in living it—on my own terms, in my own ways.

What is left of Islam in my life is my experience with it over the years. Now it is mostly a flurry of fuzzy but rich childhood memories and images. The images remain an integral part of who I am today. I find solace in their memory. The images of a sunny balcony and a restless little girl aching to go out and play, or the touch of cold rose water on my cheeks still make me smile. Whenever we come across a mosque, I ask my daughter if she'd like to go inside the "dome buildings" so that we both can sit on the cold tile floor and wait for someone to sprinkle us with rose water. I am secretly glad that her answer is almost always No. I do not want her to share my history, my baggage. Yet when she is sick, I sometimes find myself hovering over her sleeping face and chanting "Ya Salamu" one hundred times.

I light incense occasionally and turn on all our lights after the sun goes down. I run my fingers along a string of crystal prayer beads on lonely nights and hope all my grandmother's prayers went answered. I think about my parents often, and I am grateful that they have found their Allah now that they need him the most. But on most days, I do all this while listening to heavy metal music and craving a Big Mac!

6 WHAT I BELIEVE

John Langan

For much of my childhood, I imagined I had the Truth about the big questions in life. The answers were all in the Baltimore catechism provided in my early grade classrooms at St. Margaret's School in Reading, Pennsylvania. An earnest student, I did as I was told and memorized all of the essential questions and answers about life:

1. Q. Who made the world?
A. God made the world.
2. Q. Who is God?
A. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.
3. Q. What is man?
A. Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God.
4. Q. Is this likeness in the body or in the soul?
A. The likeness is chiefly in the soul.
5. Q. How is the soul like to God?
A. The soul is like God because it is a spirit that will never die, and has understanding and free will.
6. Q. Why did God make you?
A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven.
7. Q. Of which must we take more care, our soul or our body?
A. We must take more care of our soul than our body.
8. Q. Why must we take more care of our soul than of our body?
A. We must take more care of our soul than of our body because in losing our soul we lose God and everlasting happiness.
9. Q. What must we do to save our souls?
A. To save our souls, we must worship God by faith, hope, and charity; that is, we must believe in Him, hope in Him, and love Him with all our heart.
10. Q. How shall we know the things which we are to believe?
A. We shall know the things which we are to believe from the Catholic Church, through which God speaks to us.

With all these Great Truths in hand, it was my pleasure to inform my cousin, who had the great misfortune to be Protestant, that he was destined for eternal damnation. No matter what kind of life he lived, the fires of hell awaited him because I had also learned that "Outside the Church there is no salvation." So frustrated and challenged was my cousin by our endless religious debates that he went on to become an ordained minister.

I prayed a lot in my early years, having been taught that prayers were a way of piling up credits that could be redeemed after death. I prayed for indulgences—gifts from God that removed some of the temporal punishment due for our sins. With indulgences, faithful Catholics might hope to suffer less in this life and to spend less time in purgatory—a place where souls go after death to atone for their sins before ascending to heaven. Thanks to indulgences and to the sacrament of confession—where one acknowledges one's sins to a priest, does penance, and receives forgiveness—I was secure I was heaven-bound.

And what and where was heaven? Heaven was up there somewhere, and God was an all-powerful and all-knowing man (or woman) living way above the clouds in a great white palace beyond the reach of any space probe. And one of God's apostles, Peter, was a sentry at the gate of Heaven, providing directions for newly-arrived souls to go on to heaven or straight down to the eternal fires of hell or to a temporary stay in purgatory, where a purifying fire would cleanse away their sinful residues.

But all the certainties of my childhood gave way to doubts and questions as I approached my teenage years. The shy and sweet sister of one of my childhood friends was stricken with leukemia and died soon after. Why would God allow this? And I learned from another friend that our church pastor would take altar boys out to dinner with him—and after drinking heavily he would move his hand onto the thigh of the boy unlucky enough to be seated next to him during the car ride home. Why would God permit one of His priests to behave like this? Another priest, a religion teacher, assured our class that if we went to Mass every morning for an entire month, any request we would ask of God would be granted. I earnestly did this, arising early to accompany my devout mother to 6 a.m. Mass every morning. Why, then, did the “impure thoughts” that had begun to besiege me not go away?

While I increasingly questioned my childhood faith, I was not yet prepared to reject it. After all, my parents were Catholics, and to me the fact they were good people was a powerful argument for Catholicism. They must understand something about faith that I was not yet old enough to fully appreciate. I remember the time when the neighborhood learned that a white woman and her black male partner were to move into the row home next to my parents'. My father was a quiet but respected presence in the neighborhood, and a group of neighbors soon appeared at his door. “What can we do to stop this?” they asked, looking to him for guidance. He shook his head in disapproval and responded, in his low-key way, that nothing would be done. “We're not like that,” he simply said. His deed was more eloquent than his words, but I knew what he was thinking: that the couple were just people, after all, and they had a right to live wherever they wished. The neighbors took no action, and when the couple moved in, my parents related to them in the everyday decent way they related to everyone.

Later in adolescence I read a little book by John Dewey titled *A Common Faith*, which argued that such timeless ideals as courage, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, and kindness were to be valued for their own sake. For the first time, it fully struck me that my parents were good people not because they were Catholics but *because they were good people*. There was no need to give the Catholic church the credit for the decent people who they were. I remember vividly the moment when I realized my parents were acting not for a heavenly reward but for the sake of goodness itself. I was sitting on a rocking chair in my bedroom, and as I continued to rock, I felt my childhood faith in Catholicism fall away. And for the first time in my life, I no longer feared in any respect the devil about whom the nuns in my childhood had told me horrific stories. With the exception of a few moments in the throes of one Stephen King book or another, that devil has never returned. I sat there and rocked on that chair and felt exhilarated and independent and free. I felt, more than ever, that the responsibility for my life and my conduct was up to me.

Another book I read soon after had an equally powerful impact on me. In his memoir *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams described watching his beloved sister die of lockjaw after weeks of terrible suffering:

"He found his sister, a woman of forty, . . . lying in bed in consequence of a miserable cab-accident that had bruised her foot. Hour by hour the muscles grew rigid, while the mind remained bright, until after ten days of fiendish torture she died in convulsions. . . . the idea that any personal deity could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman, by accident, with a

fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made pure atheism a comfort. God might be, as the Church said, a Substance, but He could not be a Person."

For years, I simply stopped believing in any kind of larger power. Given the countless wars and bloodshed in the world, and the endless suffering of the innocent, faith in a loving Providence and a personal God was not possible. But my view gradually became more complex as I came to appreciate that the very essence of us, our humanity, can only be realized in a world where there is no protection from suffering and death. There is a scene in Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev* in which a boy and his father come upon a dead bird, lying on its side in the curb. The boy asks his father why the bird has died, and the father explains that everything that lives must die. Why, the boy asks, and the father replies that is the way God made the world—so that life would be precious. "Something that is yours forever is never precious," the father says.

I realized that if I were an all-wise and all-knowing God setting the world into motion, then evil and suffering and death must hold sway for our human souls to grow and for our behavior to count. And if I were God, I could not intervene and play favorites; I would have to remain silent so men and women would be able to discover the deepest parts of themselves. At the same time, I would not allow men and women to be alone; and in the midst of the terrible challenges they would face, their souls would realize, "I am with you." In the words of Aeschylus, "He who learns must suffer, and, even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."

At this point I decided I didn't know what to make of God after all, and I eventually found myself focusing more on the here and now. On the one hand, my belief is nicely stated in a line from W. B. Yeats: "What do we know but that we face/One another in this place?" On the other hand, I believe that the world is an infinitely mysterious place. Much of the mystery is in our conscience, the moral imperative that seems part of our human bedrock. That imperative tells us it is important to be kind to others and treat them as we would ourselves want to be treated. All the teachings of the Bible and the sacred scriptures of other religions can be reduced quite simply to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." And we don't need any of those scriptures to tell us what to do—we know it. I admired Abraham Lincoln's words about all this: "The Bible is not my book nor Christianity my profession. I could never give assent to the long, complicated statements of Christian dogma. When I do good I feel good. When I do bad I feel bad. And this is my religion."

Lincoln's words work very well for me. At the same time, on an almost daily basis, my religious instincts are engaged by the incontestable mystery and awe and wonder all around us. Let me cite just three examples:

1. A twisted young racist slaughters nine people during a Bible-study class in Charleston, South Carolina, yet the daughter of one of the victims finds it in her heart to say the following to this hate-filled man at his bond hearing:

"I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

Many of the other victims said similar things. Flowers piled up in front of the church where the killings took place, and in the midst of the flowers, someone placed a handwritten sign, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

The amazing grace and mercy in these reactions is beyond understanding; we are left in awe and wonder at such transcendent humanity.

2. The author Alice Trillin tells a story of volunteering at a camp for children with disabilities. Alice was especially good friends with a little girl she called by her initial, L. L. had genetic diseases that kept her from growing normally and from digesting food. She had difficulty walking. She had to be fed through a tube at night. Still, the little girl was, in the author's words, "the most optimistic, most enthusiastic, most hopeful human being I had ever encountered."

As Alice became closer to the little girl, she grew more curious about L. What had given her such strength, such joy and optimism? What was her secret? Then one day at camp, while the children were playing a game, L. asked Alice to hold her mail. On top of the pile was a note from L.'s mother. Alice glanced at it and saw the words that L.'s mother had written to her daughter. "If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, L., we would only have chosen you."

Just as humans are capable of transcendent forgiveness, they are capable of transcendent love, and in the presence of it, we are left with awe and wonder and a sense of the utter mystery of our lives.

3. The columnist Nicholas Kristof writes about a little Vietnamese girl who he describes as "one of the mightiest people I've met, at 94 pounds. She has a towering presence, at a bit more than 5 feet tall."

The eighth of nine children in a very poor farming family in the Mekong Delta, she shone in school, but her mother demanded—unsuccessfully—that she drop out of primary school and earn money as a live-in housemaid in distant Ho Chi Minh City. When the girl was in 8th grade, her mom burned her schoolbooks to try to force her to drop out, but she borrowed books and continued to excel. She persevered even when her parents again burned her books in 12th grade, and as she graduated from high school, she prepared secretly for the college entrance examination. Her mother learned of this and lashed out, "I hope you fail the exams." Other students arrived at the exam location escorted by cheering, doting parents; she arrived alone, sobbing. Still, she aced the exam.

With no money from her parents, college seemed unaffordable, but she saved every penny she could. She had long worked every vacation—sometimes in a factory job by day and in a duck soup restaurant by night. At college, she confined herself to a food budget of \$3.50—per week. Malnourished, she toppled over three times in the middle of class in a dead faint.

Professors and students discovered that she was starved and basically penniless—leaving her feeling humiliated. But it was a turning point because her teachers and classmates responded with kindness, sympathy, and help. She was then able to eat enough to keep from fainting in public. She shares a small room with two other young women, all sleeping on the floor next to each other. She studies until midnight, and then sets her alarm for 4 a.m. to resume studying. Her parents have now come around, partly because they see she will soon become an English teacher and the best-paid member of the extended family.

Such heroic strength is an inspiration to the human spirit. Not able to explain it, any more than I can explain the forgiveness and love in the previous examples, I experience her amazing grace, along with the kindness of those in her school, and I stand in awe of it. I am fully aware the world abounds in such stories; they convey truths of the soul and heart that are beyond the power of reason to understand.

With the evidence of such truths, many can make a leap of faith in a loving God. I can't do this, but I align myself with the thoughts below:

- Dag Hammarskjöld wrote, “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.”
- Albert Einstein, while rejecting traditional religious beliefs, continually affirmed the presence of mystery in the universe and the need for a “humble attitude of mind towards the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence which, at its profoundest depths, is inaccessible to man.”

I would describe myself as a spiritual person but without traditional religious beliefs. I am really interested in all the timeless questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Why are any of us here? What is life supposed to be all about? What does it mean to connect with other people?”

Not knowing about life after death, I believe in life before death. This world, existence—it’s all a mind-blowing mystery. We know in the deepest parts of our hearts that there is an infinite preciousness and fragility to life. We hear a voice within us that says we must do our best to care for one another and do our best to never stop seeking truth. We know that one day we will be dust and ashes, and at the same time we know that we are in the midst of wonder. We are, as Shakespeare said, “Such stuff as dreams are made of.”

7 NUMINOSITY

Sara Walden Oremland

The first time I realized that I was having a religious experience, it was both transcendent and terrifying. I was sitting on a metal folding chair in a small, drab meeting room at my university at a student-run service for born-again Christians. The service was at its climax, and the gathered students were singing with full-hearted joy. The physical atmosphere of the room seemed to change - the air felt thicker and full of vibrations. It was something I could not see but could definitely feel. A feeling of euphoria swept over my body and I felt tears of some unidentifiable emotion start to gather behind my eyes. I was concentrating so hard on not letting them fall, that I began to get a headache at my temples. Confused, rapturous, embarrassed, and guilty, I fled the room. I was a Freshmen, seventeen years old. I was also an agnostic Jew who deeply distrusted religion.

I had grown up in a majority Catholic town. It was in 1st grade, when my classmates began to attend their First Communions, that I first found out what religion even was. My classmates asked me, "When is *your* First Communion?"

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's when you commit to loving Jesus. Do you love Jesus?"

"Who is Jesus?" I asked.

"You don't know who *Jesus* is?" they asked. "Do you even believe in God?"

"I don't think so," I said. I had never given it any thought. I didn't even really have a concept of what God was.

"What religion are you?" they asked.

"Nothing," I said. Even before they replied, I felt a stab of fear. Being *nothing* felt scary. *Nothing* is when you don't possess something you should have; *nothing* is an absence. *Nothing* is a dark and empty word. *Nothing* is a bottomless cavern that you could fall into and fall and fall forever.

"You're going to Hell!" they said matter-of-factly. They explained *Hell* to me. It sounded a lot like *nothing*, except with flames.

That day, I went home to find out if *nothing* and *Hell* was really my fate. "What religion am I?" I asked my mother. Maybe she could give me an answer to tell my classmates. Maybe I could erase *nothing* with a real answer, and then I would not have to go to Hell.

"Well," said my mother, "your father and I were both born Jewish. But neither of us liked religion, so it's more like Jewish is our culture. That's why we celebrate Hanukkah." In my family, we celebrated Halloween, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Valentine's Day, New Year's Day, my March birthday, Easter, Mother's and Father's Days, and the Fourth of July. I thought of them as times for gifts and sweets; religion never entered into any of them. Suddenly, Hanukkah seemed to glow in my mind as something more important.

"So is my religion Jewish?" I asked. I was eager to have an answer to bring back to my classmates.

"Yes, but just as a culture. Not really as a religion." I didn't understand *culture*, but it didn't matter. I didn't get the answer I was looking for.

Still hopeful, I asked, "But do we have a religion? Do we believe in God?"

My mother replied, "Your father and I believe in Transcendentalism. We believe that God is inside every one of us!" Years later, I found out that my parents were great followers of Henry David Thoreau and his writings; in particular, *Walden*. They also liked Emerson and all the rest of the Massachusetts Transcendentalists. They had been married on Thoreau's birthday,

on the edge of Walden Pond. "But," my mother said, "you can believe in anything you want, now or when you are older."

My mother intended to give me the freedom to choose a belief as a gift, but at that moment, all I wanted was something to define my religious identity so that I could face my classmates again. I tried to picture what it meant for God to be inside of me. I pictured a floating face in my stomach. How did God get there? It didn't really make much sense, but I was excited. At last I had an answer! I was not *nothing*! And if my parents said that God is inside of me, that must mean that I could say that I believed in God!

The next day, as soon as I could, I told my classmates, "Guess what! I found out that I do believe in God!"

"So what religion are you?" they asked.

The long, strange word my mother had said eluded me. "I can't remember! We're Jewish but we're not really - it's something else. But my mom says that I have God inside of me!"

My classmates laughed. "You are definitely going to Hell," they said. For the next few weeks, they would remind me of this every day. They would taunt me about this and other things too. I never again pictured God inside of me. Now I knew for certain that I was *nothing*.

Over the next eleven years of school, I came to feel both isolated and angry about religion and in particular, Christianity. As with any other attribute, being different as a kid is difficult. I felt isolated, and not just because I was not Christian as it seemed all the rest of my classmates were. There were other factors that ran deeper than I even realized at the time. My classmates and their parents had deep bonds through participating in church and in church-sponsored athletic leagues, whereas my parents were odd-duck newcomers, and---even worse---non-religious loners in my small town. This was a logical reason why it was difficult for me to find a way to fit in, but at the time, I only saw my classmates as mean bullies who were demonizing me for being both Jewish and Godless.

In later grades, I learned about the Holocaust, about the Crusades, and about the Inquisition. In my mind, I equated Christianity with hatred. No wonder my classmates were bullies, I thought. No wonder they hated me for not believing what they believed. The more I learned about world history, the more I began to distrust religion. I was *proud* to not have one. *Nothing* was surely better than hate, lies, and delusion. During my senior year in high school. I would listen to John Lennon's song, "Imagine," on repeat, imagining a world without religion, comforted to know that others out there wanted the same thing. And yet, that feeling of being *nothing* still nagged at me. I could reject the evils of religion, but *nothing* still felt like an absence.

Even as I began to embrace having no religion, I was also continually fascinated by the subject. In middle school, I had read and re-read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* for both its window into puberty ("We must, we must, we must increase our bust!") and for its exploration of religions. In high school, some of my classmates were killed in a car accident, and I made up my mind to go to their funeral Mass, even though the idea of entering a church filled me with dread and fear. I stood at the very back of the crowded church, waiting for someone to point at me, the non-believer, and shame me for desecrating their beliefs. Instead, I was surprised that at the end of the service, strangers wanted to shake my hand and tell me to "Go in peace." I didn't know how to reconcile this beautiful sentiment with my other experiences with religion.

My repulsion and attraction to religion followed me to college. During my first semester as a freshman, I enrolled in a course called "Bible as Literature." The title of the class made studying the Bible feel safe. The very title seemed to treat religion as a fiction, which in my mind, it was.

The course was fun! I happily analyzed Biblical texts as I would any work of fiction. I enjoyed looking for themes and symbols and drawing my own conclusions about the stories. It felt like a game. During this time, I became friends with my classmate and dorm hall acquaintance, JD. He was a newly born-again Christian, full of zeal about casting off his sins and embracing religion. In his dorm room, he had the “Two Footprints” poster on his wall. The poster talked about seeing two footprints in the sand, one for yourself and one for God, and that when you see only one set of footprints, it symbolizes God carrying you through troublesome times. I found that poster to be both silly and moving: silly because God was a fiction, but moving because I yearned for someone to give me the sense of caring and support that this fictional God could give. But God *wasn't* real, and I wanted nothing to do with religion. Still, I wondered how would I ever get that feeling of loving kindness that JD said that he had from being loved by God.

However, when JD found out I was both Jewish and *nothing*, he told me, with real concern, that I would be going to Hell. Instead of feeling scared, as I did in my hometown, I felt a mixture of pity and anger. How sad it was that he was taken in by religion. How sad that religion made my friend a judgmental bigot, I thought.

But “Bible as Literature” was still fun, and JD and I were still friends, and we even co-wrote a paper for class about one of the Gospels. When he invited me to come to Bible study, I eagerly joined him. To me, talking about the Bible with him and his friends was the same as it was in class: a fun literary game. That they could believe that any of this was real made me feel sad for them.

When JD invited me to come to a Sunday service in that drab meeting room with metal folding chairs, I readily agreed. I was curious, and what harm would it be to go? I thought of myself as a kind of anthropologist. I sat at the back of the room, an observer, not a participant.

After I fled the room, euphoric and alarmed, I struggled to make sense of the experience I had had. Was it God? Every logical part of my brain said no, but how to account for what I felt? How to account for the emotion, how to account for the feeling of an invisible presence?

It was then that I remembered that I had felt this way one other time in my life. At the end of my sophomore year in high school, my mother began home hospice for her terminal cancer. I was fifteen and alone when she slipped into a coma as she lay in the recliner in our living room. I called the hospice nurse, and when she arrived I went into the adjoining room. A few moments later, that same sense of euphoria and invisible presence washed over me. Just as I began to wonder where this feeling came from, the nurse came in the room and told me that my mother had died. What had I just felt? Could it be that I had felt my mother's soul being freed from her body? How could that be, when neither of us believed in the idea of a soul? I thought about this question on and off, including when my father and I buried my mother's ashes in the woods near Walden Pond.

Walking away from JD's Sunday service, I wondered if these two mysterious events were connected. I wondered if I had really just had a religious experience. I wondered what it would mean to embrace the feeling, to go back and see if I could get that feeling again. That feeling was the opposite of *nothing*. It was a feeling of joy, of love, of freedom. Maybe religion was the thing I'd been missing all along. Maybe my parents had it all wrong, and I had it all wrong. Billions of people believed in God - why shouldn't I?

I shoved these questions down. It wasn't difficult. Despite having many kind, generous, and gracious friends of faith, I still found that religion often could inspire hypocrisy and cruelty. I found the Bible to be full of contradictions. And I still bristled at the idea that of all of the religions in the world, only one religion could be the “correct” one and that all other beliefs were

wrong. But I couldn't forget those experiences of euphoria and the questions about faith that they had raised. I still felt like I was missing something and that choosing *nothing* was still an unsatisfying choice.

Since that day in the drab room with the folding chairs, I have been lucky enough to have experienced that feeling of a holy presence many times, and I have finally found a name for that feeling: *numinosity*. *Numinosity* is characterized by feeling a sense of awe, a sense of the divine, a sense of the sublime.

I have experienced *numinosity* in nature: in the Swiss Alps, surrounded by the grandeur of the mountains, and in Northern California, amongst the towering ancient redwoods. I have felt *numinosity* when I see human beings perform incredible physical feats: athletes, dancers, artists. I have felt *numinosity* when I am among a group of people all simultaneously experiencing intense emotions: at the ballpark, in the theater, at a funeral. I felt *numinosity* at my wedding, as my husband and I articulated our love for each other, surrounded by the love of our family and friends.

I may have no religion, but I no longer feel that I have *nothing* or that I am *nothing*. I don't believe in religion, and I don't believe in *nothing*. I believe in *numinosity*.

8 OPPORTUNITIES TO GIVE BACK

Bob Miedel

When I first began to compose my thoughts about my experiences and how they shaped my beliefs and philosophy of life, I thought luck had a lot to do with how I developed over the years and what I came to believe and do. I was raised in a two-parent family on top of a mountain in Western Pennsylvania, the sort of place where I could walk barefoot in the summer as a six-year-old, unattended, on an unpaved road to visit my grandparents and cousins, and where, during the winter months, we had plenty of hills for sledding and cross-country skiing.

The top of our mountain was unusual in that it was a plateau of a square mile or so, which meant there were a few small farms. As a result, there was the farm work of mucking out cow stalls, even for pre-teens like me. While we didn't have a pony, our neighbor did, and so we spent time riding in the fields and woods. So how lucky was that? I also remember climbing a small rise above our house and admiring the vistas as fields stretched and nudged up against the forest, or climbing maple tree saplings to the upper branches and riding them back to earth when they bent.

Looking back, I was indeed very fortunate to experience such a childhood, but like most memories, the picture is incomplete. We were poor. My father worked at the base of the mountain in a "cap factory" (making blasting caps that would be used to set off dynamite), and he earned barely enough to feed and clothe me and my four siblings. My stay-at-home mom had her hands full raising us all on a small budget.

Also, life on the mountain could be dangerous. I recall the trauma of being attacked by a rooster when I was about four, funny as that now seems. Another time, I had gasoline from my neighbor's gasoline storage tank splash in my eyes when the farmer's son cranked the pump too fast and the nozzle flew out of the truck's gas tank. The farmer dragged me across his lawn and down the basement stairs to dunk my face in the wash tub filled with soapy water. When I stopped crying as the stinging subsided, he asked if I was okay. When I said yes, we got back to work—no hospital visit and no lawsuit either. I don't even think I told my parents afterwards though they probably could smell the lingering odor of gasoline on my clothing.

While I love my mountain culture, it still set me back academically. My mother tells me I didn't start talking until I was about four, and when I went to 1st grade at the base of the mountain (no kindergarten for me), I couldn't tie my shoes and was punished by having to take off my shoes and walk around in my stocking feet. This greatly amused the rest of the 1st-graders. In addition, I had some sort of auditory learning disability; my hearing was good, but I could not easily sound out words or break written words into syllables. I recall crying at night because I just couldn't "hear" the syllables in words and couldn't complete the worksheets I was given for homework.

So in one sense, while I was lucky, with both good and bad luck, one can't build a philosophy of life based on luck unless, perhaps, one wants to become a professional gambler. I also realize that others don't have the good fortune of being born into an intact nuclear family, no matter how poor, and being born into a family that did not have to face crippling prejudices.

What did inspire me to act throughout my life was opportunity, not luck. Like most Americans of my generation, I've been given many opportunities through education, allowing me to go beyond the Appalachian culture and experience new cultures. I do not want to imply that I disrespect the Appalachian culture, which, like all subcultures, is unique and wonderful in its own ways and which I still treasure. For me, though, a late bloomer if there ever was one, education was the door that opened up to me a world of ideas, freedom, and change.

My philosophy of life, then, is based on the ideal of giving others the same sort of educational opportunities I have been given.

My opportunities began in elementary school, which, painful as it was at times, started me on the road to a fulfilling life. I'd like to say that I quickly caught up to the others once I started 1st grade, but I was just an ordinary student, struggling mightily. Still, by the time I was in 6th grade, I did not stand out as awkward, even though I was extremely shy, and I got along reasonably well with my fellow classmates. My first major opportunity occurred in 8th grade when I was given the opportunity to spend a weekend at St. Vincent Prep School, which was run by Benedictine monks and had the goal of preparing students for lives as monks and as priests. I was very religious at the time, and I came back from that weekend at St. Vincent impressed, partially because I thought I might have a vocation as a priest and, candidly, because I had a great time playing basketball and hanging out with some pretty cool high school students who lived on campus ten months a year. When I returned to my home, my mother asked, "Would you like to go to high school there?"

Although we could not afford to pay the costs of attending a private boarding school, we were offered a tremendous financial aid package. My family had to pay a dollar a day. While that seems ridiculously inexpensive today, it was actually a good amount of money for a family of seven with limited income. The financial aid wasn't because I was smart. In fact, the headmaster told my mother when I applied that he did not think I could handle the academics.

After attending St. Vincent Prep, I went on to attend St. Vincent College as an English major with a minor in Philosophy. As it turned out, in college I came to love learning, and while my first semester of college saw my lowest GPA in my college career (but still above a 3.0 GPA), by the end of college I graduated *maxima cum laude*.

Looking back, I think I was very persistent and structured, with a good understanding of when and how to study. While I had an eye for detail, I could also put those details together to understand large concepts found, for example, in the study of history and literature. I also had several years of Latin and German in high school and college, allowing me to use my knowledge of those languages' grammar to help me get a good grasp of English grammar. In addition, I was fortunate to have had some really good college professors who mentored me. One of them, for example, wrote on one of my papers, "weak sentence—use a strong verb and the active voice." I had no idea what he was talking about, and when I asked him to explain, he directed me to Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* and to the chapters in the *Harbrace Handbook* on "Emphasis" and "Sentence Variety." His advice and my reading on the subject of style made a big difference in my ability to express myself orally and in writing.

I eventually entered the monastery as a Benedictine monk, taking simple vows after spending a year in the novitiate when I worked afternoons in an operating grist mill, but spent the mornings, after mass, reading both religious and secular works. While I learned a considerable amount about theology, Catholic history, philosophy, and the Bible, I also learned how to live the Benedictine motto "Ora et Labora" (Pray and Work). So after having attending high school, college, and graduate school (theology) at St. Vincent for over eleven years—about half of my life at the time—I left its safe confines.

What to do? Fortunately I had a friend living in Philadelphia who invited me to stay with him while I adjusted to secular life. I taught Catholic high school in Trenton for a term until the school closed, and then worked a year in a Woolworth's store in Philadelphia. I soon discovered I hated retail, and so I applied to graduate school and was accepted into Temple University, where I earned two master's degrees and finished the course work for a Ph.D. in English Literature. At Temple, I was awarded a Teaching Assistantship and then a Fellowship. To make enough funds to live on, I taught courses at Rutgers University (Camden campus), Manor Junior College, and La Salle University and worked in a writing lab at Community College of Philadelphia on the weekends. I was busy and happy.

The point of all the above is that an ordinary child from a subculture of the American dominant culture, raised in a family with little money, was given several amazing opportunities to go beyond his neighborhood to experience the liberating effects of a formal education that spanned three decades.

Education changed my life in joyous ways.

In an essay that captured much of what I feel about the liberating effects of a broad “liberal” education, Allan Simpson, in an article written in 1962 entitled “The Marks of an Educated Man,” (today it would be the “Marks of an Educated Person”), writes about the freeing effects of a solid, well-rounded education. A liberal education, he notes, is not about knowing lots of trivia, but about experiencing the freedom that comes from being able to look beyond the narrow, parochial boundaries of our own subcultures, whatever they are, and being able to consider the world from a larger perspective. Although his essay touches on several “marks” of an educated person, for me he is saying that a good liberal education frees us to think and reason so that we can make sense of the world, see its beauty, and not be bamboozled by illogic, unbridled passions, or demagoguery .

Simpson’s essay stays with me even to this day. I can remember taking a class in my sophomore year of college on literary criticism. We would read a novel or short story, say Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” and analyze it in the light of feminism, socialism, Jungian psychology or some other perspective. This was a new world for me, and suddenly I felt able to rise above that narrow perspective that Alan Simpson cites. Such an education also gave me confidence to believe, for instance, that I could understand science when I took both chemistry and astronomy in college, and later, that liberation theology made sense, as did other theologies, including even the “death of God” theology that arose in the 60s and 70s. Education made sense of my life and the world around me. For instance, I understood some of what drove the founding fathers of the United States when they gathered in Philadelphia to write the Constitution, what caused the French revolution, or why the presidential election of 2016 seems to be echoing the same themes that emerged in the election of 1912.

I felt empowered. With effort I could read texts on most subjects, though admittedly the depth of my knowledge would sometimes be shallow. On the other hand, when I took astronomy in college, for instance, that shallow knowledge grew throughout my life as I read more on astronomy, keeping current on black holes, quasars, neutron stars, and the possibility of a multiverse. Even today when I return to visit my siblings and mother in Western Pennsylvania, on a cloudless night the sky is clear enough to allow me to recognize not only the constellations, but the planets and the seas of the moon.

My education also added richness to my life. When I open a door, I might think of a line from *Ars Poetica* by Archibald MacLeish: “For all the history of grief / An empty doorway and a maple leaf.” Or, locking the doors at night and turning off the lights as I go upstairs to bed, a line from Othello might pop into my head: “Put out the light, and then put out the light,” but I also recognize the irony in that quote since I am no Othello and my wife is no Desdemona. Or when I see a stray dog approaching, I sometimes think of Robert Francis’ *The Hound*: “Life the hound Equivocal Comes at a bound Either to rend me Or to befriend me....” For me, then, education enriches my life, giving me a sense of depth and dimension—and much pleasure.

Education gave me confidence to try new things. Although I had been shy, even at the beginning of college, I learned in my sophomore year how to speak up in class and then, later, at conferences and workshops. I like to sing and can read sheet music (again from my education), so I joined a choral group. That confidence also made me believe I could attempt home projects. I needed a new backyard fence, so I built one. We needed to replace a French door, so we did it ourselves.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of earning a college degree is that it is a way out of poverty, and in fact most college students today probably are primarily interested in the economic benefits of earning a college degree rather than experiencing a well-rounded, freeing education. It is true that one of the results of my having earned a college degree and graduate degrees is that I eventually landed a meaningful fulltime position that allowed me to live comfortably and save money for my retirement. My wife, who was raised in a housing project in Philadelphia, also benefited economically from a college degree, allowing both of us to buy a home and raise our children in a comfortable, supportive, loving environment.

What then is my philosophy of life? Simple: work to give others the same sort of life-changing educational opportunities that were given to me. When I was in graduate school, one internationally-known professor said to me when I told him I wanted to work with at-risk students, “Oh, you wouldn’t want to do that for your entire life,” but that is exactly what I wanted to do and that is what I did.

I recently retired from my position as Director of the Academic Discovery Program (ADP) at La Salle University, having worked for thirty-five years with highly motivated at-risk college students from Philadelphia, students who come from families with low incomes (200 percent or less of the federal poverty level) and who have disappointingly low SAT scores. An opportunity program, the ADP gives these students the opportunity, along with assistance, to change their lives through education. By the way, using these selection criteria, I myself probably would have been eligible for this program had it existed in the 1960’s, assuming someone back then would have recognized my potential. During my years at La Salle and with the ADP, I selected students by interviewing them, reviewing carefully their college essays and their recommendations, and analyzing the results of some on-campus tests, all in an attempt to admit students who had an appreciation for education and hard work.

Of course, once these students came to campus, we provided them with lots of support: a rigorous credit-bearing six week summer program, tutoring, advising, and counseling, and a terrific financial aid package that kept them from being buried in too much debt when they graduated. Thanks to generous donors, we were also able to offer emergency funds for students in extreme need and to buy some textbooks for students who did not have funds to purchase their own, which in turn allowed us to build an impressive lending library once the texts were returned by the end of each semester. The students responded to these opportunities, and their graduation rates and GPA’s helped make the program a model for other colleges. The students are mainly focused on getting their degrees so that they have improved job opportunities and the chance to work themselves out of poverty, and that is certainly an important factor, but for me the real goal of an education is to liberate oneself so that he or she can experience the wonders of the world—and the job opportunities that will follow. I believe our alumni are realizing this liberation too.

Although I do not keep in touch with all my graduates, many call, write, or visit, and through social media I know that others are doing well and benefiting from their life-changing education. One student and her family are missionaries in China, one is a municipal court judge, one is a lawyer, one is a nurse at John Hopkins Hospital, some are teachers, many are social workers, and others are successful accountants, business people, or computer scientists. Most are raising their children to value education, so the cycle continues.

I have been very lucky to find my mission in life and to have had a series of opportunities that helped me find that mission and to develop my philosophy of life, which is, in essence, to help others. Specifically, to help others by helping them earn their college degrees. I feel fortunate to have had so many life-changing opportunities, and lucky to have been able to work with so many talented, kind, amazing, hard-working students.

9 WHAT I BELIEVE

Richard Kratz

As I grow older – I am 77 years of age - I become more and more convinced, at least to some extent, that there is an element of luck involved in many aspects of our lives. My life has been no exception to this conviction. I had the good fortune to be born to caring and loving parents who saw their role as parents as their most important responsibility in life. I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in a small town of, maybe, 1,500 inhabitants. At that time, in this town, there were certain expectations made of individuals and families. One of those expectations was that you not only be a member of one of the churches, but that you attended on a fairly - regular basis. My family was a member of the Presbyterian Church, and we did as expected and attended weekly, almost without fail. The only exception was the month of August when many families would take a “pass” on church. But when I was in my formative years – let’s say 8 – 12 years of age - although my parents may not have attended in August, I did. I felt a real need to be there, that this was where God expected me to be on Sunday morning. In the interest of transparency, I confess that I am not sure how much I bought into the belief of predestination that was common among Presbyterians. Still, at that point in my life, I took my faith very seriously, and I appreciate my parents encouragement to do so.

As I moved into my high school years, my participation in church-related activities started to wane. This was due to the fact that, among my peers, going to church was not “cool,” and that I was heavily involved in sports. In college, I was still playing sports year ‘round, and it is safe to say that my faith went on a hiatus. But in my junior year, a girl that I had been dating and I began to get serious about our future. She was not only the nicest and prettiest girl that I had ever met, but she was someone whom I wanted to spend my life with. She was someone with a very strong faith, and we would talk about this faith being the center of our family and home. It became clear that as our love for one another continued to grow, so too did our Christian faith. We have been married for fifty-two years, and our church and Jesus Christ is at the center of our faith. We raised two sons who were active in church throughout their high school years. I wish that I could say that both are very active members of their church today, but this would not be true. However, my wife and I can say with great pride that both boys, now men, care very much about others, and they spend time helping those less fortunate.

But let me turn to the real purpose of this paper, that is, “what do I believe.?” When I think about this question, I am always reminded of the famous long-time Pittsburgh Pirate Hall of Fame baseball player, Wilver (“Willie”) Stargell. On this particular day, Willie was being interviewed and he was asked what he knew about life. Willie gave a very long answer, but he ended with “And I know that I know what I don’t know.” And for me, and what I believe, there is so much that I “know that I don’t know” about my faith. Maybe the reality is that I don’t have the aptitude that would allow me to understand what “I don’t know.” Dr. Eben Alexander, in his book Proof of Heaven, talks about our concept of time here on earth as compared to time in heaven. There is not a 24-hour clock in heaven, time is not of the essence, and this is a difficult concept for me to grasp and understand. Maybe this explains my lack of ability to fully comprehend some of the issues that I have with my faith. Vickie Girard in her book There’s No Place Like Hope: A Guide to Beating Cancer in Mind-Sized Bites, was “spot on” when she wrote (p.122): “During the worst part of her battle with cancer, one of my dearest friends, a woman of limitless faith, said it best: ‘God sure has a lot of explaining to do when I get there.’” With this said, let me make it clear that I consider myself a person of faith. Clearly, like most, I believe, I have doubts about God, my faith, and more. But as Paul Tillich, the Protestant Theologian, reminds us: “Doubt is not the opposite of faith, it is the element of faith.” The Rev.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” I believe in God, and I believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God. I believe that God created everything, and part of that order includes the theory of evolution. Dr. Francis S. Collins, who headed the Human Genome project, and who was an atheist prior to completion of this project, wrote The Language of God in 2006. One of his theories is that God created the universe and all of its inhabitants, but God does not interfere with our day-to-day activities on earth. I share Collins’ belief. God does, however, provide us with a roadmap as to how we should live our lives as individuals, and as communities. I believe that God does this through the Bible, prayer, and the church. I also believe that we each have an innate knowledge of right and wrong, sometimes called Moral Law.

I spent about 95% of my professional career working in two community colleges in different parts of Pennsylvania – the other 5% was spent teaching in elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. One community college had a large enrollment of approximately 10,000 students, and was located in the eastern part of Pennsylvania. This college was situated on a bucolic 200-acre campus in a well-to-do county, and most students came from a mid-range of social-economic-standing (SES). The other community college was small with an enrollment of about 5,000 students, and was located in an inner-city of approximately 75,000 residents in central Pennsylvania. The overwhelming majority of these students came from families whose SES was well below the mid-range. I worked at the larger community college for 18 years, and at the smaller, inner-city college for 20 years. Both community colleges espoused the egalitarian purpose which is one of the hallmarks of community colleges. And I am often asked which of these two community colleges gave me my greatest satisfaction and rewards. I do not believe that this is a fair question because both experiences were very different in so many ways. But clearly, from a faith-based perspective, my work at the smaller, inner-city college provided me with tremendous professional and personal satisfaction. It is here where I believe that I had an opportunity to “walk the talk” of my faith through word and deed.

My faith tells me that I not only have to care about other people, but I have to help them to help themselves. I subscribe to Benjamin Franklin’s axiom that “God helps those who help themselves.” The community college provides that vehicle for students to better their lot in life. It provides hope and opportunity. But in my opinion, many of these students are apprehensive about life in general, and studying at a community college in particular. They are just “not sure” that they are cut out for college. One of my greatest joys was to speak with the incoming students, most of whom sat in front of me looking scared and absolutely certain that they would not graduate in two years hence. I felt a real need to encourage these students, to make certain that they knew that all the faculty and staff would do all within their power to make certain that they were successful. This was our job. So I would begin with what I hoped were words of inspiration from Rene Portland, the legendary women’s basketball coach at Penn State. Coach Portland said that to be successful in life you need three bones: You need a “wish bone” because we all need dreams and aspirations; And you need a “funny bone” because we all need the ability to laugh at ourselves; And finally, we need a “back bone” because we have to have the courage to pursue our goals and dreams. And then I would go on about not being afraid to fail – not that I encouraged failure, but it comes with our pursuit of dreams – and then I would enumerate a myriad of failures that I had to deal with throughout my life. And I would let them know that some of America’s greatest leaders, Lincoln for example, endured some horrific defeats and tragedy in politics and in life. And then I would finish with the famous quote John Greenleaf Whittier: “For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: ‘it might have been.’”

I often gage a person’s reaction to what I have said by observing their eyes (some say that the eyes are a direct link to the person’s heart). In person after person I could see these students

start to feel better about their freshman year in college, and that they could be successful. This was later confirmed by their comments to me when I handed them their degree at commencement exercises. This talk with incoming students at orientation, and subsequent conversations with them in the student union or elsewhere, was my way of exemplifying a caring attitude about others which is a basic tenet of my faith.

I said earlier in this paper that I believed in God, but that I had some doubts about certain issues connected to my faith. Let me briefly talk about those issues. I do not believe that the Bible is inerrant, and I am not convinced that the Bible is exclusively the word of God. For me, there are too many inconsistencies and contradictions. Moreover, there are some issues that I just cannot accept. For example, Genesis 3:16 talks about women being subjected to men. I think of the love, respect, and admiration for my wife, and there is just no way that either one of us would concur with this doctrine. And heaven is another concern. I sometimes believe that heaven is a man-made construct to provide hope for oppressed people and those at the margin. Heaven, after all, promises all believers a better life through eternity – and eternity is another concept that is difficult for me to grasp, after all, eternity is a very, very long time. But as the aforementioned book, Proof of Heaven, indicates, heaven is a totally different place from all experiences here on Earth. And there are other issues with my faith that cause me difficulty in understanding. The Holy Trinity, for example. This is another concept that I have never understood despite many and extensive discussions with believers who totally subscribe to this concept.

And yet, although there are sections of the Bible that I cannot agree with, there are other parts that I completely agree with and try to emulate. For example, I Corinthians: 13:13, states that “Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.” And for me, the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes, both found in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7), have special meaning. These words are not only inspirational, but they tell us how to live our lives in a Christian manner.

Finally, I would like to talk about prayer and the power that it holds for me. I don’t believe that God sits somewhere and hears our individual prayers. But at the same time, there is something in my prayers that works – although I cannot be sure how it works. I have never prayed to get a job or please allow me to win at some competitive endeavor. What I do pray for, however, is for God to allow me to be the person that I am. For example, I can recall walking down a hallway for a potentially contentious meeting with one of the unions over contractual negotiations that were not going well, and a faculty strike loomed on the horizon. I prayed to God – all while still walking down the hall – to let me be person that I really am, and let me be ruthlessly honest – but not in a mean or antagonistic manner – so that there can be no misunderstanding with my position. There were other times that I would pray to God to let me do “the right thing.” I always remember something Father Theodore Hesburgh, the late President of the University of Notre Dame, said in his book God, Country, and Notre Dame: “We don’t do things because they are politically correct, and we don’t do things to win friends and influence people, we do things because they are the right thing to do.” Although I did not pray that often, in each instance, I would come away from prayer with a feeling of relaxation, that things would be fine, and that I knew what I had to do.

So “What do I Believe?” I believe in God, I believe that I have a responsibility to do good for others, I believe that I must care about others, and especially those less fortunate than me. I believe that love is the greatest human quality that a person can possess, but it must be shared. I believe that God created everything in an evolutionary manner, and God stays out of our day-to-day activities. Although I suspect that I will not live to see it, I look with great anticipation to Jesus’s return to Earth – although I fear that he will be disappointed in what he finds. I believe in the beauty of small things like a walk in the woods, the beauty of nature, and

the seasons of the year. And finally, I believe in the beauty of the big things like the love you feel when your spouse and/or children return after an absence. This feeling of love is all powerful. The scriptures were right!

10 WHAT I BELIEVE

Sally Friedman

The first glimmer I had that something awful was happening in the world was when I'd heard one of my parents say to the other, "Shhh- the kinder!"

"Kinder" is Yiddish for children, and that's what my sister and I were during the dark days of World War II. But children are, of course, instinctive. Ruthie and I knew, without truly knowing, that what was troubling our mom and dad was something too terrible for our young ears to hear. Those hushed warnings were actually my unofficial introduction to the Nazi Holocaust. "Why are you whispering?" we would demand of our parents. But they never answered us.

My next glimmer came when people who talked strangely and had sad eyes moved into our largely Jewish Philadelphia neighborhood. On some Jewish holidays, my mother would make an extra batch of cookies or a honey cake for these people. One day, when the weather was warm, I saw that the lady getting the treats had strange marks on her arm.

"What's that?" I asked her with the total innocence of a child. It looked like paint to me.

That neighbor looked stricken and so did my mother, who basically told me that I must never again ask about that. It would be a few years later, when I was enrolled in Sunday School at our neighborhood synagogue, that I heard about what had happened to Jews because of a man named Hitler. I learned it not so much from our teachers, but from the older kids. They loved scaring us with talk of burning people in ovens.

I begged my sister to let me sleep in her room because for a long spell, I was sure that Hitler would come after us. We were, after all, Jewish. No, ignorance was not bliss, and learning the truth wasn't much better. If there was a God, as I was learning in Sunday school, then why did that God let this happen? And if Jews were The Chosen People, what were we chosen for? Extermination? I can only imagine how many other Jewish children growing up during and after World War II struggled with that conundrum. I surely did. "Are you really there, God?" I used to ask in the dark of night.

Fast forward a few more years, when I had let go of my image of God as a kindly and benevolent man on a throne watching over us. I had started reading, learning, listening, and sorting out my own beliefs. I was, in short, turned off to Judaism. Had there ever been a more extraordinary reason not to believe in a merciful God than the death of six million Jews, including children? I quit Hebrew school, which did not make my parents happy. But I was intransigent.

In college, I deliberately took whatever European history courses I could. Never mind that I was an English Literature major. I still wanted an academic look at that chapter of history that still left me so angry and yes, horrified. I went to synagogue with my parents on the High Holy Days because it would have broken their hearts if I hadn't. I listened to sermons about these Days of Awe when our fates would be sealed. And I thought of those gas chambers, and how horrifically so many fates *were* sealed in them.

I was married in a synagogue, again mainly because it was what was expected of me. My own personal faith was based on an ethical system I'd created for myself. I had babies of my own--- three daughters --- and because of tradition and expectation, I sent them off to Sunday School. They drew and colored pictures of Jewish symbols in those first years. They learned about Passover and ate matzo, the "bread of affliction," and then they chose to have Bat Mitzvahs, Judaism's welcome to Jewish obligation and commitment.

I never ever tried to discourage them from embracing their Judaism, but I admit it - I was relieved when they each read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I wanted them to know all they should about this heritage, including its trail of tears and pain. It is part of who they are as Jews.

And just when I thought I'd resolved my own beliefs--still tinged with anger and disappointment at modern Jewish history--I saw a notice that would unalterably alter my faith life. It was an easy-to-miss appeal, back in the late 1980's, for people willing to participate in Steven Spielberg's crusade to try to collect the testimonies of every Holocaust survivor on Planet Earth. Steven Spielberg does not think small. To conduct the interviews with Holocaust survivors, writers were especially welcome, although that was by no means a requirement. And I had become a freelance writer who knew the ins and outs of conducting even difficult interviews. Or so I thought.

I didn't even pause to consider the complications of taking several days of training in New York City. I think I deeply, yearningly wanted to stop burying my head in the sand of anger and, instead, DO something. Little did I know how life-altering that "something" would turn out to be. My confidence about being prepared was torn to shreds during that intensive training. Any arrogance I had about the interview process vanished.

And that humility was sobering - and so instructive. The mock interviews, the videotaping, the important history lessons, and the preparation for the varied emotional reactions we might encounter, all left my head spinning. It also left me deeply grateful that this was such a carefully constructed mission. Tampering with the scar tissue of Holocaust survivors was nothing to be taken lightly. I was awed by the responsibility. I would also learn that once you enter that secret chamber of a Holocaust survivor's memories, you can't really ever leave it behind you.

I have sat opposite men and women with stories so horrific that it was almost impossible not to gasp. As the videotape recorded their descriptions of what they had experienced - as I needed to let respectful silence sometimes reign - I also learned that in silence, some of the most important memories emerge. Not only is it golden, when we let it, silence can lead us straight back to the muffled footsteps of the soul.

It was another powerful lesson that I've never forgotten.

Nor will I ever forget the elderly rabbi whose testimony I took on a day when rain splashed down on the windows of his daughter's beautiful suburban home. The rabbi was dressed in what was probably his best suit, one a bit shiny with wear, as he recited the details of his experience, and of the losses: parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins... He could recite all that with remarkable calm. But when he tried to explain how it felt when a kind priest in a small French village had taken him in, had brought him a steaming cup of soup and had fed it to him because he was too weak to handle a spoon, that's when the rabbi could not go on. That simple act of kindness had left him speechless and overcome.

And yes, this rabbi had *forgiven* those who were responsible for his profound losses. It would be a pattern repeated again and again in these unforgettable interviews.

There was the lovely woman I met at her modest apartment near the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where she had become a distinguished professor. She had made tea for us and was apologetic about her chipped saucers. Those chipped saucers didn't bother me one bit, especially after I heard her story. The only child of older parents in a small town in Czechoslovakia, she had been so cherished that their only mission was to save her --not necessarily themselves. One night when she was about ten years old, they had told her to pack her warmest clothes and bundle them into a blanket. They didn't tell her why. Then they walked her into the woods not far from their home, and when they reached the most dense part, they pinned a note on her coat. It simply said "Please take care of our child."

And then these parents, who so loved their little girl, turned and walked away. They didn't stop to hug or kiss her, she later realized, in order to make it easier for her.

"Take me with you!" she begged, but they would not turn around.

She survived and lived to tell me her story because a brave and kind Christian family had found her and had taken her in. And yes, she too refused to hang on to rage. "We can't change the past," she told me quietly.

I never forgot it.

I continued to actively seek out Holocaust survivors after the formal Spielberg project had ended. I felt compelled, in my writing life, to tell their stories, and, I admit, to fathom forgiveness and faith of a kind I could never have imagined. That was how I came to interview Charlotte, a survivor who lived just a few miles from me, in a continuing care community. Our life stories could not have been more distant or different. My quiet, safe suburban life was in such stark contrast to her history, yet here we were--- neighbors, both Jewish.

Her story was stark and chilling.

She and her four sisters had lived ordinary lives until Hitler changed their world in Czechoslovakia, first with the yellow stars they were forced to wear as Jewish identification, and then by being jammed into a ghetto attic. Conditions were horrendous, and food was so scarce that much of the time, they were starving. From that attic, the family members, including Charlotte's parents, were herded onto the cattle cars headed for Auschwitz Concentration Camp. So there they were, five young girls and their mother and father in a world gone mad. Their only hope in life was to stay together. To be there for one another.

That was not to be.

The girls' mother did not get past the first "selection," and died in a gas chamber at Auschwitz almost immediately after their arrival. Also in the "selection" process, Dr. Josef Mengele, well known as the Holocaust's "Angel of Death," examined each girl to be sure she was healthy enough to provide slave labor. That's when he determined that the youngest, 11-year-old Rosalie, was too thin and too weak for labor. That meant immediate extermination. And when the sisters begged and pleaded for her, Dr. Mengele offered this alternative: immediate extermination for all the sisters.

Miraculously, a mother of a child already headed for extermination volunteered to accompany her child to the gas chamber. She wanted to die with her daughter, and had seen the despair of the sisters. Little Rosalie surreptitiously changed places with that mother, and survived at Auschwitz. The miracle was that actually all five sisters survived through their wits and will. After the war, they all emigrated to the United States, are all still alive, close to one another, and still embrace life's joys, not focusing on their sorrows.

Their father, despite being desperately ill, also survived a forced labor camp, and emigrated to the United States at the end of the war. He later married a former neighbor whose own husband and two sons had been killed in the camps. He passed away about 20 years ago, having remained an observant Jew all of his life. Even after profound loss and displacement, the sisters lived full lives, had families of their own, cherished their adopted country, and celebrate the miracle that, yes, they still have one another.

And throughout their lives, as Charlotte reported, they all still believe in God. "We forgave, not because our enemies deserved it, but because we deserved peace." Charlotte also suggested that in her life, she saw what corrosive hatred and anger can do.

That was it for me. I still remember how that accumulation of all that anger I had carried around for so long - all that insistence that I could never affirm faith when it seemed that God had deserted my people - kind of lifted. It was, I admit, strangely mystical. But the emotions surrounding faith are not necessarily logical. I never returned to a God with white hair sitting on

a throne in a place called heaven, probably my earliest image. But I did mellow. I started trusting in that elusive "higher power" that somehow is out there/up there/and, yes, just there.

My anger dissipated. My insight about what strength and faith really mean came to the fore. And what has lingered for these many years is this: If Holocaust survivors embraced the power of forgiveness, so could I. And I now recognize that forgiveness is at the core of my beliefs.

I am proudly Jewish.

I am at peace.