



Stumbling toward Faith

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Introduction

My birth name always felt alien to me. It was difficult to pronounce, difficult to spell, and I was named after someone I never really wanted to be. That's why, at a crucial point in my counseling, I asked my therapist if he would be willing to rename me.

He was honored and spent some time in the baby section of a local bookstore, looking up meanings and definitions, his eyes growing bleary with the choices. A few sessions later, he handed it to me somewhat anticlimactically on a sheet of paper:

Renée.

I am able to write this book partly because that is my new name. I haven't used any of my birth names for years. They've all been legally changed, written over with a new arrangement of vowels and consonants, scrubbed clean of any association with the past. It was a bit like coming back

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to life again, being given that new name. It meant a fresh start, a new chance, a hope of finding myself brave after many years of fear and trembling.

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I grew up in an abusive household.

Much of my abuse was spiritual — and when I say spiritual, I don't mean new age, esoteric, random mumblings from half-wiccan, hippie parents. I don't mean that I grew up thinking all the wrong ideas about religion or what it meant to be saved because I was given too much freedom or too many options. I don't mean that my father protested the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance or told me there was more than one way to heaven.

I mean that my father raped me while reciting the Lord's Prayer.

I mean that my father molested me while singing Christian hymns. I mean that there was one way, that I was (literally) “under God,” and that I could never escape my sinfulness.

Never.

My father corrupted nearly every single thing that in my deepest moments of belief I see that God created for good or for righteousness.

He did it slyly, without my even realizing it.

He did it deliberately, without regret.

He fully convinced me that God was on his side, that I was bad, that I was lucky to be loved (by God, by him, by anyone), and that I was to blame for things no child — nobody — should ever be blamed for.

I had a strange sense of power because of this. I was terrified of God, yet I felt more powerful than God at the same time. My dad told me that if the sun didn't come out in the

morning, it was because it (the sun) “didn’t want to look at your ugly face.”

So I felt more powerful than the sun, but I felt powerless under the weight of my father’s body.

I made wagers but never followed through on my agreements.

I dared God to kill me (it would have been a welcome relief). I embraced fundamentalism—it was familiar, it fit in with my self-blame, and to some extent, my overblown sense of power.

I wandered through various religions, particularly the ones with strict rules and definitive boundaries. I was baptized a Mormon, a Jehovah’s Witness. I flirted with Scientology. In the end, I came to one conclusion: the warm acceptance I felt in each of these groups was there only because I was conforming to that group’s ideals. The people loved me only because they had to, because it was written in their religion that they treat others well. They had faith in me only because I shared their faith, too.

The moment I doubted or strayed or showed independence, they became vultures. They told me I was unworthy. It was almost like living with my father all over again. Almost.

I don’t even know what “home” means, except that I long for it. I long to heal, to have this yawning chasm inside of me filled, to believe in something bigger than me, holier than I

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dare to imagine, more gracious and full of kindness than I dare to wish for.

This book is an expression of my journey “home.”



a dusty cathedral inside my heart:
cobwebs engulfing a silent altar,
hardened wax from a burned-out soul.

i don't know when the beauty died,
or when the breath of god grew stale
or how the candles
— monuments of glory —
were consumed
and engulfed
by the darkness.

down on my knees in the rubble
surrounded by fragments
of shattered stained-glass
cutting,
ripping,
slashing tender skin.

collections of teardrops
in bottles and bell jars,
skipping a stone, for every sin.

My father prayed with me every night.

He lay on top of me, touched my breasts, and prayed that I would be forgiven.

“Father,” he said.

I cringed at the association.

“Heavenly Father, make my daughter a better person. Let her be good enough for her mother to come back. Let her prove to her mother that she is a good girl. We know that her mother left because she was a bad girl. Help her to be good enough. Make her a better person. Take away her sin. Forgive her in spite of how awful she is. Let your blood cover all her sin. Help her to stop being so bad.”

I lay underneath him and trembled. I closed my eyes, as much to avoid his face as to pray properly. I made promises. To stop disappointing him, to stop disappointing God. I repented for all my sins, for all of my wrongdoings, admitted my fallen wretchedness, my guilt, my shame.

I would have done anything to bring my mother back.

I would have done anything to feel clean, to feel loved, to have been good.



a white-skinned virgin
lies naked and ashamed
on the altar of your madness.
obsessed with the purity
of a never-broken heart,
of a never-broken child,
so perfect,
so ripe for the taking.

our consecrated rite:
in and out
pounding in the soul,
pleading in the heart,
(helpmehelpmehelpmehelpmehelpmehelpmehelpmeholdme)
lying open on your altar
paralyzed
helpless
disbelieving.

where is the sacrifice, father?
where is the ram in the thicket?

i am the ram.
i am the sacrifice.
the only thing good enough for god.
for you.

I drove through the darkened streets, crying so hard the wheel vibrated underneath my hands. I didn't dare pull over; I was afraid the grief and shame would destroy me, that it would make me stiff, that I'd slip away.

I had just left my associate pastor's office. He was a man I'd deeply admired—the first one after years at the wrong church who had won my confidence, my trust. We'd met a couple of times, and at the time he said he liked me. He told me I was a sensitive soul, that God would do great things in my life.

I believed him. I forced myself to. I had spent years seeking great things for my life, great movements of God, emotional healing, a sense of purpose, connection. I didn't want to be the one who never had miracles, the one who always sat on the God sidelines while everybody else got God touchdowns.

The summer mission trip was part of those God dreams.

I wanted to go to Mongolia. There was so much sadness there, so much brokenness. I believed, just by looking at photos of those folks, that God would do great things for them. They had hunger in their eyes, the same quiet but desperate longing I saw in my own. I believed somehow that, by offering God to them, I would find God offered back to me as well.

I filled out the mission trip application at a Jack in the Box restaurant. Drinking a strawberry shake, and with

trembling hands, I answered all the questions. How long I'd been saved, what Jesus meant to me, why I wanted to go share the good news.

Then I got to the page devoted to "What is God doing in your life?" And I realized, with regret, that I didn't know what to say. God had been pretty silent for me; he hadn't given me a whole lot of touchdowns. I still believed in him (I still wanted to believe). I still saw how he gave to other people. I saw their changed lives. I saw their moments, their miracles. And I still yearned for that kind of obvious divine intervention.

And my associate pastor had promised it would come. I wanted to believe I wasn't beyond its reach.

So, in that Jack in the Box, with '80s music blaring and teenagers smoking pot right outside the back door, I wrote the truth: "I believe God is calling me to this mission trip because this is part of what he wants to do in my life. I have felt stale and old and tired. I have wanted to rediscover God, even as I am sharing the discovery of him with others. I understand the desperation of wanting God and not being able to find him; I share that desperation still. I want to find God in Mongolia."

A few weeks later an adult volunteer pulled me aside after a midweek meeting.

"Hey," he said, avoiding my eyes.

I looked directly at him, dared him to look back.

He didn't.

“We’ve reviewed your application for the Mongolia trip and decided you can’t go.”

I stood there in disbelief, questions and thoughts flitting through my head. “I can’t go? Can’t go? Isn’t a mission trip something that everybody can go on? Isn’t a mission trip, by simple definition, something that everybody should want to do? Share the good news? Change the world? Isn’t it some kind of sin to say that somebody can’t go?”

I tried to understand it. It couldn’t have been about money—I had to arrange my own support; the church offered nothing more than the schedule and the contacts. It couldn’t have been about the number of people applying; I knew that there were more spots than there were people even interested.

Tears filled my eyes, and I stammered out the question: “Wh-wh-why?”

“We need people who are confident in their faith. We need people who are committed. You are not confident; you are not committed. I’m sorry,” he said, patting my shoulder. “Maybe next year.”

I ran out of the building and toward the haven of my associate pastor’s office. He would understand. He would know. He had promised great things for me. He had believed in me—in God in me. He had promised that God would work in me, and he would know that this was part of that working, part of the promise.

But when my associate pastor saw me coming, he shook

his head sadly, stood up from his desk, and closed the door while I was still at the other end of the hallway. I wanted to pound on the door. I wanted to fling myself through it, into his office, to plead for another chance, to prove my worthiness. Instead I stood in the middle of the hall, frozen with horror, and felt the shame overwhelm me. Tears ran down my cheeks, burning as they fell. I was engulfed in nausea. I felt myself stop breathing.

The repulsion that God must have felt for me welled up inside. My shame encompassed me. “I am not good enough to do the work of God,” I thought. “I am not good enough for him to use me. There is something inside me that even God can never touch, can never change.”

I ran out to the parking lot, past the clusters of other college students having cookies and coffee while discussing Amy Grant’s backsliding. I opened the car door, sat down in the seat, and started driving, aimlessly, afraid to stop, afraid to be left alone with myself, alone with my feelings of self-loathing and self-hatred, alone with my sense of self-revulsion.

Driving around in the car that night I played the song “When God Ran” by Benny Hester over and over, sobbing through the words, screaming out like a prodigal, begging God to take me back: “The day I left home I knew I’d broken his heart / I wondered then if things could ever be the same.”

I confessed every little thing I could think of. I apologized

over and over for my wickedness, my unbelief; I made deals and bargains with God. And in the end, after several hours and many miles, I pulled up in front of my father's house, opened the car door, and realized that what was wrong with me was unchangeable.

My whole life my father said I was beyond hope, that in the end no one would ever love me. He had said God could never trust me, that I would never be clean, that I would never be good enough.

I believed him. And now I understood why.

The church officially agreed.



I've spent my life believing I have nothing to offer God. Certainly he died for me, and my worth exists so far as he was willing to redeem me, to make me his child. If I were the only person on earth he would have still gone to the cross, and all of that. But me, the person I am apart from God, apart from grace, is worthless without him.

It wasn't just the fear of hell that kept me on the floor by my bed, kneeling, begging to be born again.

It was the fear of being worthless, of being lost, of being unloved. I was terrified of my horrible sin nature, terrified it would devour me, strangle my life, swallow my potential.

There was little separation between God and self, and what distinction I could find was based on outcome. If I did

well on a test, even if I had studied, I gave God the glory. If I failed a test, even if I had studied, it was that I hadn't tried hard enough. The only way to do well, to be well, was to replace myself with God.

When my associate pastor was asked how he was, he'd reply, "Happier than I'm entitled, praise God."

I never understood these things, but I believed them. They ingrained themselves into my heart and helped define the way I saw myself, all that I was apart from the mercy of God.

